1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 English in Malaysian Schools

Recently, the learning of English has become a major issue when the government stressed the importance of the English language to communicate in the global arena. The government of Malaysia urged Malaysians to upgrade their communication skills in the English language. Jassem (1993) says that Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the Prime Minister of Malaysia had stressed the importance of the English language several times in the media. Jassem (1993) quotes from Ramayah (1991), Dr. Mahathir’s phrase ‘English is vital for progress’ which Jassem says summarizes it all. This is because Malaysia is going to be the centre of information technology worldwide. Malaysia has also become one of the potential industrialized countries. Therefore, to communicate internationally, it is very important to master the English language. In order to achieve that, schools are targeted as the most important vehicle to instil the love of the language as well as to build the foundation to master the language.

The Minister of Education, Dato Najib Razak made an announcement recently that the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) would be an open certificate. However, students need to obtain good English results to further their studies in universities or private institutions and they have to sit for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) commencing from the year 1999. He said the test is essential to gauge each student’s command of English because the courses offered at the tertiary level demand a better command of the language.
Although English is acknowledged to be equally important as Bahasa Melayu, results in the National Exams have surprisingly shown a decline in percentage. Every year, while other subjects show tremendous improvement, English on the other hand does not show any improvement and continues to decline drastically.

Table 1.1: SPM English result at Negeri Sembilan State and National level from year 1991 to 1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N.S. %</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>63.3</td>
<td>69.0</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>67.1</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>66.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National %</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>60.3</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>61.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 1.1 shows that the SPM English results at the national level for the last four years have never reached the 70% passing mark. As for the Negeri Sembilan State level, the highest for SPM English result was in 1996 at 71.4% and it started to decline after that.

Table 1.2: PMR English results at Negeri Sembilan State level for Year 1996 to 1999 according to grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Total of the candidates</th>
<th>A %</th>
<th>B %</th>
<th>C %</th>
<th>D %</th>
<th>E %</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NS State</td>
<td>15286</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>32.2</td>
<td>67.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>63.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NS State</td>
<td>15531</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>67.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NS State</td>
<td>18262</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>68.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NS State</td>
<td>16623</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.2 shows that the results of Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR), both National and Negeri Sembilan state level, have declined too. According to Negeri Sembilan Educational Department reports on PMR for Negeri Sembilan State and National level from year 1991 – 1999, there were also fewer students scoring As in English in many schools. The 1999 PMR English results also declined compared to other subjects. In Negeri Sembilan alone, both the state and National PMR English results for the year 1998 and 1999, the percentage of passing the subject was the lowest compared to other subjects.

Despite efforts to raise the level of English language proficiency, there is little overall progress. Based on a study by Talib and Edwin (1990) it is identified that schools from the rural areas had a lower percentage pass compared to the urban schools. This confirms that rural schools played major role towards the high failure rate in the English language. Although schools in the urban areas have a higher passing rate in the English language, they do not show any improvement in terms of quality, which the majority of them get only weak credits.

1.2 The Curriculum

English is the second language in Malaysia. It is taught in primary and secondary schools. It is clearly stated in the secondary schools curriculum (1987:1) “English is a means of communication in certain everyday activities and certain job situations. It is an important language to enable Malaysia to engage meaningfully in local and international trade and commerce. It also provides an additional means of access to academic, professional and, recreational materials. The English language programme thus aims to provide the basis for these post secondary school needs.”
The intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical development of the individual is also emphasized in the English language syllabus. The need for mastering the language in Malaysia and internationally forms the basis in the planning of the contents and structure of the syllabus.

It is also mentioned that the syllabus should be presented in global terms by considering the needs and roles of English in Malaysia. It should be presented through four language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing within the scope of specific topics with the inclusion of moral values. The syllabus contents specify what the students should be able to achieve by the end of secondary school through the four language skills and these include the list of sounds, grammar and vocabulary.

If a comparison is made between the primary and secondary English language curriculum, there is quite a big difference where the use of songs and music is concerned. Based on the researcher’s comparison of both primary and secondary curriculum, it is found that songs and music are integrated in the primary school curriculum but they are not specified at all in the secondary school curriculum. If songs are used in the secondary English classes, they are normally based on the teachers’ discretion.

The secondary school curriculum is inappropriately disintegrated from the primary school curriculum. As noted by Gamble (1984), songs and music have potential in language learning as they can develop an individual in terms of intellect, emotion and kinaesthetic. Therefore, songs should be included in the secondary English language curriculum.
1.3 Rationale

The use of pop songs in the ESL classroom is looked at in this study because it is time that teachers take a serious look at this neglected material. English teachers are still in doubt about using this material in their classes. Based on the researcher’s experience of teaching English for more than 17 years, she notices that conventional ESL teaching methods with conventional materials have so far been less effective. Even when each student learns English for at least ten years of schooling life, most of them are unable to speak or write good English. Many colleagues who are English teachers and certain researchers such as Harmer (1991) share this opinion.

Harmer (1991) notices that English is often taught in a boring manner with topics that are outside the students’ interest. This de-motivates the students. Therefore, students find it difficult to apply what they have learnt to actual situations. Thus, teachers are faced with the big task of building a strong foundation of positive attitudes towards learning English and adopting appropriate practices for teaching the language to students. Textbooks and charts are mainly the resources used by the teachers. Harmer (1991) says, there is no clear research that shows which method is the best. It is up to the teachers to judge whether their students need more grammar drills or more communicative activities.

There are many methods of teaching used by teachers. Some teachers prefer to lecture and give endless notes and some teachers like to do drills and exercises. A few innovative teachers would come out with creative ideas such as using dialogues of foreign speakers, asking for directions so on and so forth. It keeps the students’ interests for a while but if they are asked to practice the dialogue repeatedly, they soon become bored. Harmer (1991) identifies the most
common method used in class is the drill method where a teacher will put a chart on the board and students are asked to repeat several times. It sometimes will go on to the extent the students just open and close their mouth mimicking without producing any sound.

Based on the researcher’s personal experience as a teacher for the past 17 years, it is noticed that every time songs are used, especially pop songs, in secondary school classes, the motivation and interest of students becomes very high. Thus, by doing this survey, the researcher aims to show that students in the secondary schools prefer pop songs to be used in the learning of English.

Even though many researchers such as Nordoff and Robbins (1975), and Zola and Sandvoss (1976), and Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) have mentioned the importance of using songs in language learning in general, the researcher would like to emphasise that not all kinds of songs would interest students especially teenagers. For example, nursery rhymes would not be interesting enough to stimulate teenagers. Songs specially written for EFL or adapted are artificial and Murphey (1990) thinks students would not find them stimulating enough. Pop songs, on the other hand, are more appropriate particularly for secondary school children. Pop songs help to inject the element of “fun” into the process of learning the second language but then as noted by Dubin (1974), their use in the classroom has been largely ignored.

Domoney and Harris (1993) also believe where students’ interest and motivation are low, pop songs can provide a good boost. Monreal (1982) and Nambiar (1985) also believe that songs are capable of adding enjoyment in learning and therefore aid motivation. Domoney and Harris (1993) also believe that pop music is one way of involving students and teachers in meaningful,
enjoyable and collaborative classroom tasks especially in a context where English is not the major language and classes have more than 35 students.

Apart from increasing motivation, pop songs are considered as the best method to teach various skills and language content. Richards (1969), Dubin (1974), Murphey (1990), Griffie (1992) and Laroy (1993) agree that well-chosen songs provide excellent practice in pronunciation, grammar, and lexis, they promote listening and speaking skills as well. This is because pop songs are always present in students’ daily lives regardless of their age. They also mention based on previous surveys children, teenagers and adults, despite their races, background and countries, all love pop music.

As for most second language students, apart from the daily 40 minutes of the formal English classes they attend, listening to English pop songs is the only exposure they can get daily. Therefore, it is not surprising that many scholars support the idea of the inclusion of pop songs into the curricula. Bartle (1962), Dubin (1974), Urbancic and Vizmuller (1981) as well as Murphey (1990) are some of the scholars who strongly support the introduction of pop songs into the curricula.

In conclusion, pop songs are a useful learning material. They can attract the attention of students in a way that no other media can. The lyrics of a song are basically written to reflect events or experiences. Most important of all, pop songs are able to increase students’ motivation, as the teaching and learning would deal with activities based on students’ knowledge, music and language. Monreal (1982) claims that, songs are a natural choral language activity compared to drills. The wide range of rhythm and melody provides listening for people from all walks of life. If pop songs are used in the classrooms and they
are exploited well by teachers, the need to practice and develop the language content arises, regardless of the approach the teacher uses.

While maintaining that pop songs play an important part in teaching and learning the second language to teenage students, it is best used as an optional methodology. Zola and Sandvoss (1976) propose that songs should be one of the important components in the second language programme. However, they remind that overuse of them can cause boredom and bring about great strain on the teachers. Therefore, the researcher proposes that pop songs be used as a supportive but integral part in the language programme.

1.4 Research Questions

Many researchers such as Dubin (1974) and Murphey (1990) recommend pop songs be utilised as a means to teach a second language as it shows that teenagers universally love pop songs. However, there is no study done in Malaysia to find out whether teenagers like pop songs to be used in their classroom. By doing this study, the researcher would like to find out if there is any difference in terms of preference between listening to pop songs as a leisure activity and using pop songs in the classroom.
The research questions are as below:

1. Before using pop songs in classroom, what are the students' general attitudes towards listening to English pop songs as a:
   a. Leisure activity?
   b. Technique in classroom teaching?

2. Is there an obvious interest in learning English among students after conducting English language lessons using English pop songs?

1.5 The Significance of the Study

This study looks at Malaysian secondary students' attitudes towards the use of pop songs in the ESL (English Second Language) class. There are many studies done on pop songs by researchers such as Axelsen (1981), Rosing (1984) and Murphey (1990) on adolescents in the western countries but so far; there is no study of this kind in the Malaysian context.

Lessons using pop songs will be conducted to look at whether, in a multi-racial country like Malaysia there is any difference in students' attitude to pop songs in ESL classes. It is also hoped to help Malaysian teachers, and curriculum developers obtain information on secondary students' attitude towards the use of pop songs in the ESL classroom. Findings can be applied to English curriculum planning in Malaysia.
1.6 Limitations of the Study

This study is done in Sekolah Tinggi Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan. The school has 1,937 students ranging from Remove class to Upper six. However the English lessons conducted for this study only includes a class of Form Four students. There are 45 students in the class.

Due to limitation of time and resources, these English lessons using pop songs are done in only one school and only a Form Four class is chosen. This class is chosen because the students are of different gender, race, and ability and come from rural and urban background. Furthermore a Form Four class is chosen because the students were not having any major national exams at the time of the study. The students were between 15-16 years of age and therefore are representative of the teenage population.

1.7 Definition of Terms

According to Murphey (1990) there are two definitions of songs. The first one is international vocalizations having musical features of pitch, intensity, and rhythmic variation, characterized by continuous repetition and functioning emotionally, playfully, or hyper – habitually. It is devoid of language (words) although not of significant potential. The second definition is the same as the first definition but it includes a language that is used in a continuously musical fashion. Pop songs fall into the second category, which means popular songs with music.
1.8 Summary

This study aims to show that teenagers prefer the use of pop songs in language learning just as much as they like listening to such songs during leisure. This study will tell us the preference of teenagers towards learning English when pop songs are used as a teaching material. If the finding shows that students like pop songs to be used in the classroom, teachers should seriously look at their use in their teaching as a supplementary resource. The researcher hopes to be able to give suggestions and recommendations to teachers as well as curriculum developers.