

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

There are numerous issues surrounding the teaching of grammar; the most controversial is whether grammar should be taught at all in the first place (Celce-Murcia and Hilles, 1988; Fotos and Ellis, 1991). If the answer to that is in the affirmative, the next issue is how it should be taught.

The Malaysian Integrated Secondary School Curriculum for English Language addresses these issues head-on: "...grammar is to be taught in context and in a meaningful way. However grammar items can also be taught in isolation if necessary."(p.16)

A teacher is thus given the liberty to teach grammar as she sees right but she should make an effort to teach it in context. Grammar taught as a decontextualized sentence-level system is dry and uninteresting to most second language learners.

In my nine years of teaching the English Language at Form 4 and 5 level in various secondary schools (my first was a technical school, my second a religious residential school and my present school is a National Type Chinese Secondary School) I have always tried to focus on grammar items only when needed and always in context. However, I very often find myself being called upon to deal with particular grammar items which are problematic to my students in isolation.

In both these instances, I have taught and discussed grammar overtly with minimal metalanguage. In other words, I had resorted to what Cazden (1993) had termed as "telling" which she defined as teacher-led activities in which some metalanguage is used for explicit discussion of language itself.

However, the overt grammar instructions I gave has enjoyed very limited success. More often than not while the majority of my students will tell me that they have "understood" for instance the use of the basic passive form of "be" + past participle, it will not be long before I see sentences such as "The man was kill by the robber" in their work. Two weeks later, the same request for an explanation of the passive form will crop up again. I have since learnt to resign myself to this vicious cycle(s). Some of these students will after several rounds of the same explanation finally grasp the point I was trying to put across and produce faultless simple passive sentences. But for many, the problem will persist.

Despite the frustrations I experience, I am convinced there is value in focusing on language forms at times. Perhaps overt grammar instruction is not the best way to help students learn grammar. It is to explore other alternatives, and to gain a better insight into how my students process grammar that I have embarked upon this action research. There are varying understandings of the term Action Research but basically it refers to teachers doing research on their own teaching and the learning of their students.

PERPUSTAKAAN UNIVERSITI MALAYA

English Language in the KBSM Curriculum

English Language is a core subject in the Integrated Primary and Secondary School Curriculum from Standard 3 to Form 5. However, it is not an essential subject to pass. Its position is that of a second language. The English Language programme aims to develop the four language skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing and the accompanying grammar, sound system and vocabulary. It also seeks to educate students in the larger context of life towards producing citizens who are knowledgeable, who have high moral standards and who are able to contribute to the betterment of the society and the nation.

The Form 5 English Language KBSM Exam

Although the Form 4 and 5 English Language curriculum places equal emphasis on the teaching of the four language skills, the English Language examination students sit for at the SPM level leans more towards the testing of reading and writing. Students have to take 2 papers; Paper 1 which is an objective paper which carries 60 marks and Paper 2 which is a subjective paper which carries 130 marks:

Paper 1:	2 Comprehension passages	: 18 marks
	2 Cloze passages	: 22 marks
	Forms and Functions	: 10 marks
	Error Identification	: 10 marks
	Total	: 60 marks

Paper 2:	Cloze passage	: 20 marks
	Word Omission Exercise	: 10 marks
	Identification and	
	Correction of Errors	: 10 marks
	Making Sentences to	
	Fulfill Specified Functions	: 10 marks
	2 essays(40 marks each)	: 80 marks
	(15 for content and 25 for language)	
	Total	: 130 marks

Any experienced English Language teacher looking at the distribution of marks in

the SPM English Language papers will immediately realise that a good grasp of grammar would be essential for their students to perform well in the SPM examination since the bulk of the marks are given for the testing of productive skills of reading and writing; they are even expected to be able to pinpoint grammar errors and correct them. Under these circumstances, formal accuracy is an important concern of the ESL teachers.

The Ministry of Education had recently also announced that the 1995 SPM English 322 paper will be upgraded. It would be more akin to the O-Level English Paper which is of a higher standard and requires even more formal accuracy.

In view of these developments in the SPM English Language examination, teachers will have to give more emphasis to formal accuracy. In fact, teachers who do not help their students achieve the level of grammar accuracy they are capable of reaching are short-changing them.

Grammar in the KBSM Curriculum

The KBSM Curriculum sees grammar as one of the three components of the language; the other two are the sound system and vocabulary, which is to be integrated with the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing).

Selected grammar items are listed in each Form's curriculum specifications booklet and are encouraged to be "taught in context and in a meaningful way"(Curriculum Specifications p.4). The Form 4 Curriculum Specifications

however added that "these grammar items can also be taught in isolation if teachers feel it is necessary to do so."

It is clear that the KBSM syllabus views grammar as a tool or resource to be used in the comprehension and creation of oral and written discourse rather than something to be learnt as an end in itself.

Description of Processes and Procedures

There are eleven major topics to be covered in the Form 4 KBSM English Language syllabus. Under one of the major topics is Description, and Description of Processes and Procedures is one of its sub-topics. It first appears in Form 3 and examples of processes to be covered are pineapple canning and batik printing. The grammar item which has a direct bearing on the teaching of this topic is the simple be-passive construction, delineated 5.22 in the syllabus. Examples of this are:

- * Pineapples are grown in Johore.
- * The new air force helicopter was flown by Major Hashim.

The fact that examples are given under 5.22 Passive construction indicates they have not been introduced in the Curriculum Specifications for Form I and II.

Under the same topic in Form 4, the task given is the description of processes and procedures involved in recycling of material. Here, passive construction similar to that of 5.22 in Form 3 is not stated under grammar items to

be taught. It is assumed that students would have been introduced to this construction and mastered it.

Statement of the Problem

Although the students are supposed to have learnt the use of the simple passive construction "be" + past participle, my experience when teaching students Description of Processes and Procedures in Form 4 proves otherwise. Informal conversations with colleagues only served to strengthen the fear that this phenomena is widespread. Strangely though, when my students are given two sentences, one active and the other passive such as:

The dog ate the cake.

The cake is eaten by the dog.

students have little problem in differentiating which is the performer and which the recipient of action in both sentences.

However, many Form 4 students I teach continue to construct such sentences:

The milk is add to the mixture.

She is given the book to me. (She gave the book to me)

Such errors are considered serious as they can contribute to miscommunication and confusion. Students would be penalised if they make such errors in the SPM examination.

For this reason, I have decided to pay particular attention to the simple present and past passive construction of "be" + past participle of verb in this piece of action research.

I am aware that describing a process requires more than just the mastery of the simple be-passive construction. Students also need to master the conventions of discourse that cross sentence boundaries and help create a cohesive text. This would involve the use of referential forms such as pronouns, the articles and sentence connectors. However, for the purpose of this study, I will only focus on the learning of the be- passive.

Purpose of the Action Research

Since giving overt explanations of the rules underlying the usage of the be-passive has not proven to be productive in my experience, I will in this study, design tasks which will help the students to be conscious of the structure, usage and rules governing the simple be-passive construction.

Cazden (1993) labels pedagogical activities the teacher uses to lead students towards such guided enquiry as "Revealing" (for a detailed discussion of this, please refer to Chapter Two).

This action research is designed to investigate whether this kind of task is successful in helping my students to develop insight into the form, usage and rules governing the use of the simple be-passive so that they can

- monitor their own output with the knowledge of the be-passive
- transfer this knowledge to other written tasks.

Answers to the following questions are sought in this Action Research:

1. Did the students' use of the simple be-passive to write a description of a process improve at the end of the study?
2. Did the tasks help or hinder students from gaining further insights on the use of the be-passive? How?

If the findings show that tasks which reveal grammar structures to students are helpful in enabling them to gain linguistic knowledge, I would have extended my repertoire of options to grammar teaching. I can thus use the same strategy to help my students become aware of other linguistic features.

This study would also help give me a students' perspective of how they process the be-passive in particular and grammar in general. It would also give me insights into the problems they might have in doing so which I am currently unaware of. This will in turn help me improve my own teaching practice.