

## **Teaching of English as a Performing Art: Reflecting On Its Role in the Curriculum**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper is a reflection on how conceptualising the teaching of English as a performing art within the English Language school curriculum in Malaysia can play a meaningful and practical role in developing an adequate moral stance of students towards other members of its plural society. It is argued that, in addition to being an interesting and creative way of teaching language, the different forms of performing art also present a realistic experience of others. It offers an opportunity for pupils through the use of aesthetics to better inform pupils' perception of others centred in a realism brought to life by the arts. This argument is considered within the context of Malaysia, as a plural society and the roles of the teaching and learning of language in developing a much more adequate moral sensibility about others through imagination and perception. The argument draws on Murdoch' ideas about the relationship between ethics and art and the authentic representation of the reality of life in plural society it offers. Based on the argument forwarded, it is suggested that a conceptualisation of English Language Teaching as a performing art can play a deeply meaningful role in developing the moral sensibilities of pupils towards other members of the society in raising their awareness and understanding about others as people. The paper concludes by recommending that this idea of the teaching of English is adopted depending on the aim of the curriculum.

*Keywords:* Teaching, English, performing arts, role, Malaysia, curriculum

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper reflects on one way that English Language teaching can contribute towards laying a better foundation for improving moral relationships between members of Malaysia's plural society. It does so by

considering, in the context of teaching and learning of English in Malaysian schools where students come from diverse moral backgrounds, how and why a conceptualisation of the teaching of English as a performing art can help increase the awareness of students towards the nature of people's relationships with others in the society and the implication for their own relationships with other members of the society.

It should be pointed out that the view on the problem of plural societies and the idea of others represented in this paper adopt a substantive understanding of the problem of the differences in people's beliefs, values and practices in the plural society. In more specific, it views the problem as embedded in an issue about the nature of certain individuals or groups' beliefs, values and practices and the importance of these differences compared to others, as well as the conflicts that arise as a result of disagreements about their importance (Nur, 2007). The view adopted is based on the synthesis and evaluation of perspectives in political philosophy about pluralism, multiculturalism, and the problem of diverse societies (Harris, 1982; Kelly, 2002; Taylor, 1994; Lukes, 1997), specifically on the issue of superficial relationships in the plural societies, in particular among members of Malaysia's plural society raised amongst others by Verma (2003). It considers the perspectives of Callan (2004), Baumeister (1998), Enslin (2001) and Young (1997) in describing what can be done to address the issue through education.

Henceforth, in considering the role of the teaching of English in promoting an adequate ethical view of others, it is important to appreciate that education, particularly schooling, has an important role in improving the relationships between different members of society (Heyneman, Tudoric-Bebic, 2000; Heyneman, 2011). One of them is providing an adequate moral stance towards other members of society among pupils. In this context, it is necessary to briefly explain the problem of plural society with respect to differences in the beliefs, values and practices and relationships with others. Others here refer to other members of the society who hold different moral values.

Within this perspective on the role of education, one fundamental assumption about the nature of education for social cohesion in Malaysia underpins this paper. It is held that the current evaluative response to others, that is, toleration, adopted in Malaysia specifically in its educational policies is inadequate in terms of the kind of bonds it promotes with other members of society (Nur, 2007; Verma, 2003; Williams & Waldron, 2008; Taylor, 1994). Although the current political rhetoric on the idea of 1MALAYSIA (a political programme introduced by the ruling political party in September 2008) (Mohamed, 2011) suggests a shift in the policy on socio moral relationships in the society towards the acceptance of others, the uncertainty about the policy and the ongoing debates about it suggests that toleration still remains as the normative of human relationships

adopted within the public policy and practice until such time as there can be clarity on the policy and practice of the new ideal. Toleration, as a normative value in relationships with others, offers minimal respect for other members of the society (their beliefs, values and practices that contribute to their status as persons) (Lukes, 1997; Appiah, 2006; Walzer, 1997). One reason for this is that tolerating others only offers a limited idea of who they are as persons (Nur, 2007). Therefore, the bonds formed between members of society tend to be superficial. There is a lack of sincerity in the relationships between members of the society. Considering the existence of moral disagreements, such as which acts are moral/immoral and why, between different members of society, there is a need to develop in students a substantive view of others that allows them to have more open and meaningful dialogues on the moral and ethical differences that underpin these disagreements (as opposed to conformity or toleration as a response in many cases that lead to nowhere in terms of strengthening the relationships between different members of society) (Nur, 2007).

The problem of the plural society is conceptualised as a dichotomy about the value of differences in a notion of dignity of people<sup>1</sup>. On the one hand, there is an understanding that the dignity of people

<sup>1</sup> This is a synthesised description that is drawn from a perspective of conceptualising pluralism for moral and citizenship education in the societies where differences in beliefs, values and practices result in moral conflicts and disagreements in Nur's (2007) and related writings.

rests in tolerating the differences in values. In this understanding, differences have no real worth in defining the identity of a person because the other is forced to accept it (e.g. I don't like you because your beliefs/values/practices are different/objectionable to me but I will not stop/prevent you from them). On the other hand, the dignity of the people is said to be situated in sharing similar values. In this sense, differences also have no real worth in defining the identity of persons because it is rejected/ignored in favour of what is similar between the people (I like you as we share certain values/beliefs/practices). Understanding the reality of the dichotomy that characterises the relationships between different members of the society, particularly in plural societies such as Malaysia (for example, appreciating the struggles, the conflicts and disagreements, including the violence due to the differentiated perspectives of others) allow pupils to better understand the importance and the relevance of their moral stance towards others (such as the place of differences in defining a person's identity). Here, education can play a role in offering a clearer picture of the reality of the problem of the plural societies such as the struggles, conflicts, disagreements and violence including death that comes with it. This philosophical framework underpins the idea considered in this paper about the role of the teaching of English as a performing art in developing an authentic idea of others.

There are two points that guide this paper. First, education and morality are synonymous in so far as educating for morality is one of the main aims of education.

Teaching and learning involve either overtly or covertly, the development of particular moral attitudes and dispositions about others either through the content, material approaches or person involved. Second, in the plural societies such as Malaysia, where students come from a plurality of backgrounds that are not only based on ethnicity, religion and culture, but also other factors such as gender, social and economic status, the teaching and learning of English can play an important role in informing pupils about other members of society. In playing this role, it is presupposed that a particular conceptualisation of teaching and learning of a subject can contribute either positively or negatively in legitimising other members of the society in the eyes of pupils. From this perspective, the teaching of English as a performing art through such things as drama, mime, music and dance can be a window to the reality of others in society (their struggles to be who they are or how they want to be accepted in society).

In reflecting on the role of the teaching of English as a performing art, the discussion in this paper begins by considering two things. First, it takes into account the nature of the plural society in Malaysia that requires a particular kind of morality to deal with the issues and problems in the moral relationships between members of society. Second, the discussion deliberates on how art provides a moral realism that allows it to bring to life the issues and problems of plural society drawing on Murdoch's ideas about art and moral realism. The discussion goes on to consider how the teaching of

English as a performing art can contribute to this. Here, reference is made to Murdoch's ideas about the role of art in fostering a moral sensibility. The discussion proceeds to relate this idea to the teaching of English as a performing art in promoting an adequate and appropriate view of other members of the society. The discussion concludes by recommending that the parties concerned give serious consideration to the adoption of the idea of the teaching of English as a performing art within the English Language curriculum as it can contribute towards the well-being of Malaysia's plural society.

Briefly, the paper begins with an outline of the nature of the plural society in Malaysia, and the problem of weak perception of others among pupils. Drawing on this problem, it is postulated how a conceptualisation of the teaching of English as a performing art can offer a more adequate understanding of others. An argument is made based on the idea of a strong relationship between art and ethics, including performing arts in developing moral sensibilities about others. The paper concludes by suggesting that an idea of teaching English as a performing art has a valuable role to play and should be adopted within the English Language curriculum.

#### **PROBLEM OF PUPILS' PERCEPTION OF OTHERS**

Generally, Malaysia's plural society is described as a multicultural, multiethnic, and multi-religious with three main races being Malays, Chinese and Indians. The nature of its plural society is unique and

complex in that the identity of its people rests mainly on their races and religions. This situation is due to some degree of the socio-political influences that determine and dominate public policy and practice in Malaysia. These influences have created a particular idea of pluralism in the society (Nur, 2007).

Religion and ethnicity have come to define the nature of pluralism in Malaysia in such a way that being a Malaysian is not enough; a persons' race and religion must be legally declared so that they can be categorised as a particular kind of Malaysian that is Malay/non-Malay, Bumiputra<sup>2</sup>/non-Bumiputra; Muslim/non-Muslim<sup>3</sup>. These categorisations continue to define Malaysians. To a certain extent, these categorisations tend to define the way many members of society view other members of the same society. School children have been found to describe themselves and other members of the society in these terms (Joseph, 2003). The complex issues surrounding the identity of "Malaysians" (such as whether a Malaysian is a Malay/Indian/Chinese/others) and the questions that reside within these issues (such as who is who is a Malaysian) suggest that there is a weak perception of others among members of the society, particularly among the pupils. They view others in particularly narrow

manner that defines other members of society mainly by their races and religions. Located within this particular perception of others is a lack of appreciation/ignorance/apathy about the nature of a persons' identity in plural societies.<sup>4</sup> This perception also suggests that there exists an inadequate understanding about the shared vulnerability of people (such as the possibility of living and dying that all peoples share). This problem raises a need to educate for a better understanding of the identity of other members of the society.

One way is through particular conceptualisations of teaching that provide an authentic view of the issue of identity and differences in the plural society. This view should be able to promote in pupils a more holistic perception of other members of the society beyond the narrow conceptualisation presently adopted in the Malaysian society. The teaching of English, as a performing art, is therefore postulated as one way of doing this for two related reasons. First, performing arts is considered as art. Second, art provides a moral realism that allows for perception and imagination. Hence, adopting the idea of the teaching of English as a performing art can provide a realistic idea of the identity of others in the society through the development of pupils' perception and the imagination of the identity of other members of the society.

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<sup>2</sup> Refers to indigenous persons as defined in the Malaysian Constitution.

<sup>3</sup> It must be pointed out that there are some moves to remove this requirement based on the recent political developments.

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<sup>4</sup> These arguments draw on Nur's (2007) description and elucidation of the problem of the concept of pluralism in moral and citizenship education in Malaysia.

### **THE ROLE OF PERFORMING ARTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MORAL SENSIBILITIES ABOUT OTHERS**

Performing art, such as dance, drama and mime, can offer students valuable visual insights into the nature of a person's identity in plural societies. This is supported by Murdoch's theory about art, particularly about literature and moral realism that suggest a strong relationship between art and ethics. The theory suggests that art can play an important role in developing moral sensibilities about others that is grounded in the moral realism of life in society. The nature of art offers a very visual idea of others (Murdoch, 1997 as cited in Lita, 2003). According to this view, members of society are portrayed through art can offer a range of ideas about others, including who they are or how they want to be perceived. In this sense, performing arts, if it is used in teaching, can offer authentic portrayals of the people and situations in the society that can allow students to use their imagination and perception (Murdoch, 1997 as cited in Lita, 2003) to visually engage in these portrayals. From this engagement, pupils can respond to and develop their insight into other members of society in a particular their identity as persons. They can form their own opinions and develop their own moral stance (as opposed to predetermined or other informed ideas about others) towards other members of the society. In another sense, the ideas portrayed by art can offer diverse expressions of the reality of the issues of a persons' identity in society. Art has the capacity to allow those exposed to it, to

see others in many different ways as they appear in reality. This is important in the context of plural societies, where identities of the persons are socially constructed in the dialogue with others and hence are complex and are determined in different ways informed by different things (Surayyah, 2007; Sen, 2006; Appiah, 2005). This dynamic idea of identity requires strong/ maximal /substantive ideas of others to capture the reality of society. Art can help develop this by their powerful or sublime glimpses into reality in their works. The relationship between art and the ethics of others in the context of teaching English is something that has been described by Murdoch in her view about the important role that can be played by art in its different forms in language learning. I would extend this idea to include the role of art in developing an ethics of others through the teaching of language.

This role of performing arts should be considered by those concerned with the policy and practice of English Language teaching not least because of the increasing and continuing prominence given to English as an important global language, and the economically binding force of English that is instrumental in the socio-political context of plural Malaysia (Ridge, 2004). They should fully recognise the relationship between art and ethics and how it can be usefully utilised in not only the teaching of the language but in the moral development of students. For example, in "*The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited*", Murdoch suggests how a proper regard for other

comes from being attentive and accepting differences in others (Lita, 2010). This is love understood as a sensibility to others and is manifested in an affirmation of the others by having a morally appropriate perception of them (Lita, 2010). In the context of this paper, a morally suitable way refers to seeing others in a way that affirms who they are as persons. It gives a picture of the actual complexity and tensions of being a particular person. In Murdoch's view, aesthetic perception would offer this possibility, that is, of allowing students to get an authentic understanding of others (Lita, 2010); one that is not encumbered by political and other views that tend to sometimes distort and take away from the humanity of others as well as the common humanity we share with others. Murdoch's theory suggests that the novelist brings the true character of the person to life (Lita, 2010). Hence, utilising the performing arts in the teaching of English by conceptualising the teaching in this sense can contribute to the development of the pupils' moral sensibilities about other members of the society. It allows the use of pupils' perception and imagination to be stimulated and enhanced (Murdoch, 1997 as cited in Lita, 2003).

Performing arts can help students see others both mentally and emotionally in a substantive sense. For instance, drama can bring to life the realism of different people and their lives whilst at the same time teaching how we ought to see people. The good or evil in people is shown irrespective of their backgrounds but comes across in

the characterisation of 'good' people and 'bad' people and their actions. Through the use of drama, the presentation of these characterisations allows pupils to appreciate the good or evil in people. It also allows them to use their imagination to see how this kind of behaviour could influence their lives. It helps them develop a more adequate stance towards others because they have a better understanding both cognitively and emotionally. It opens their eyes to others and also the reality of who they are in a way other approaches to the teaching of English may not. Another way that the performing art can cultivate this kind of thinking, and hence a moral regard for others, is through a demonstration or depiction that lends itself to moral imagination and thus, a moral regard for others that borders on the recognition of their preciousness. This perception of others can lead to an affirmation of others as persons. It is the reality that the art can bring to the students that the idea of arts as offering a substantial visual ethics of others is located. Through its various forms, arts show us what is real and help us to appreciate what is important, i.e. we are persons. What is important to be put forward to students, specifically in the context of living in plural societies is that, as persons, everyone is precious (Gaita, 2002; Nur, 2007). The arts allow us to appreciate this. For instance, mime helps us to focus on the nuances of a person's behaviour without being side-tracked by who they are. The audience can appreciate their behaviour without being prejudiced by their races, religions or gender. It also allows the

audience to draw on what is important about a person, such as the focus on the person as a whole rather than the focus on particular differences. Mime teaches to see the person in totality. It is again this seeing which maybe Murdoch was referring to in how great art fosters a moral regard for others. Here, it is added that not only great art but performing art can foster a kind of moral sensibility towards others that allows people to see others more clearly for who they are. The two examples given here suggest how the teaching of English, conceptualised as a performing art, can effectively play a meaningful and practical role in Malaysia, specifically in contributing to the well-being of its plural society.

### **SOME POSSIBILITIES**

The current English Language curriculum in schools conceptualises the teaching of English in a narrow sense. The teaching and learning of English tend to be too structured in terms of approach and focus on a narrow (although language teaching is also used to inculcate values) view of language. The teaching and learning of English is conceived more as a formal endeavour to produce students who can speak English in their everyday conversations. It tends to neglect the socio-cultural and socio-political aspects of language teaching and learning. It focuses less on the idea that “language pervades all areas of education” and “language is education” (Lier, 2004, p. 2). The approach to language education lacks a substantive understanding in particular it does not focus adequately on language

in developing better relations with other members of the society.

In this context, the idea of teaching of English as a performing art could be incorporated into the present understanding of the teaching of English adopted offering a more nuanced understanding of teaching and learning of English. In this way, the teaching of English can be seen as doing more than teaching English but also teaching about human relationship.

### **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

Considering the nature and complexity of Malaysia’s plural society, the teaching of English as a performing art has a valuable role to play in addressing the issues and problems. In particular, it can help tackle possible problems in pupils’ perception of others highlighted in this paper. It is argued that one of the things that those concerned with English Language curriculum, specifically the idea of English Language teaching can address by adopting this particular conceptualisation is contributing to the development of a better/improved moral sensibility of the identity of other members of the society. This is supported by the relationship between performing art as an art, and the development of a better perception and imagination of others centred in the realism of the issues of identity in society. Developing a better moral sensibility among the pupils about other members of the society can contribute to the well-being of Malaysia’s plural society. One reason for this is that it opens up the minds of the pupils as members of the society to an



increased appreciation of the nature and the issues/problems of the identity of person's in society. If this is acceptable as one of the overall aims of the school curriculum, then those concerned should adopt the idea teaching of English as a performing art.

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