

The Capacity and Capability of a Low Performing Rustic Primary School: Establishing the Groundwork

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this paper was to establish the initial groundwork for a larger ethnographic fieldwork case study so that the novice English teachers could be more prepared to face the peculiarities of rustic schools particularly the issue of the learning environment where they would be posted to. For the purpose of this paper, it focussed on only decontextualizing the data on climate and effectiveness factors to determine the capacity and capability of the school. Initial data revealed that English was the 'killer subject' for this case school where the Primary School Assessment Examination (UPSR) was concerned. These data were obtained through peripheral observations, formal and casual interviews, classroom participation as well as document analysis. The data from the study seemed to confirm the interrelationship of the climate and effectiveness factors to determine educational effectiveness of this low performing primary school. The descriptive qualitative data from the study allowed me as the researcher to interpret and comprehend the scenario to craft a detailed depiction of the teaching and learning of the English language in this rustic primary school. Hopefully, this would render a more holistic understanding not only on the febleness and fortes of the school but more importantly on how novice English teachers as the initiators of the learning of the English language in the classroom could make more judicious decisions on how to uplift and improve academic performance among the pupils especially with regards to the teaching and learning of English language.

Keywords: *Climate and Effectiveness factors, decontextualization, recontextualization, capacity, capability*

INTRODUCTION

As a matter of fact, the issue of competency in the English language in Sabah has been debated so often and blames have been targeted everywhere. Nonetheless it must be pointed out that the act of teaching and learning of English does not happen in isolation confining itself within the classroom context between the pupils and the teachers.

Banks and Banks (2003) pointed out the necessity of “conceptualis[ing] the school as a social system” (p.1). Appropriate and solid knowledge base of a school in relation of the teaching and learning of English should be considered especially by the relevant stakeholders so that more contextualised information could be gauged and this would help to pinpoint the core issues to be addressed for the stakeholders to initiate more relevant improvement programmes.

THE ISSUE AND RELATED LITERATURE

The main issue of this paper how able the novice English teachers are in facing the peculiarities of rustic schools particularly the issue of the learning environment for English language teaching and learning.

Each and every school is different in nature. Raven, Johnstone, and Varley (1985) made their point when describing their work which crosses subject boundaries. There are many similarities in how schools function and in their basic purpose, there are also many differences in the details of what a typical school day is like from one culture to the next (Kane, 2017). There are many skills and qualities which are important parts of educational processes that can subsequently contribute to the academic performance of the pupils. However, these general elements may not render sufficient 'scope' for education consumers to understand the actual happenings of a school to suggest appropriate improvement programmes to upgrade the English language proficiency of the pupils.

In view of such predicament, when the academic performance of the English language taught and learnt was examined in a rural primary school in Sabah, the school's anatomy and life was scrutinized. A school has a life of its own which makes up of different organic and mechanistic characteristics such as the administrative and leadership's make-up, educational programme management structure and student composition. Scientifically, it is referred to as the *meta-system* of a school. As a result, certain strategies which were deemed effective in one school might not be workable in another school. All these structures and processes must be finely tuned or complementary to each other for the school to be productive, viable and operational.

Hence, if a school wants to understand and subsequently help the pupils learn the English language better, the contextualized factors and *how* and *why* they are connected should be clearly established around the teaching and learning of that language for that particular school so that the findings can provide an in-depth information vis-à-vis the performance of a low performing school in the English language.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS PAPER

My case school was a low performing rural primary school in Sabah. Initial data revealed that English was the 'killer subject' for this primary school where the Primary School Assessment Examination (UPSR) was concerned. In connection with this, an ethnographic fieldwork study to gain an in-depth understanding of the English language teaching and learning practices in the school was the ultimate target. Before that could be carried out, a preliminary study was crucial to establish the groundwork. The data from the preliminary study seemed to confirm the interrelationship of the *climate* and *effectiveness* factors to determine educational effectiveness of a low performing primary rustic school in Sabah. These data were obtained through peripheral observations, formal and casual interviews, classroom participations and document analysis. The sample involved the Head Teacher, three English teachers and the one and only class of Year 5 pupils.

For the purpose of this paper, it only focussed on *decontextualizing* the preliminary data on climate and effectiveness factors to determine the *capacity* and *capability* of the school. The descriptive qualitative data collected enabled me as the researcher to interpret and comprehend the scenario to craft a general depiction of the teaching and learning of the English language of this rustic primary school.

INITIAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data were collected through peripheral observations, formal dan casual interviews, classroom participations as well as documents.

Observations were less structured which Hopkins (1993) termed them as open observation on the four settings manifested by Morrison (as cited in Cohen et al., 2000). With the help of prompts using who, what, where, when, how and why in guiding the observation processes, details of the setting, who the characters were, events, happenings, actions, activities were noted.

As for the data gathered through interviews in the preliminary study, the sessions involved the HT, the three English teachers and the pupils (upper primary or Level 2 pupils). Emphasis was given to post-lesson interviews for the three English teachers on classroom climate and effectiveness factors. Then they were conducted with the upper primary pupils in groups on the same factors. The data on these two domains were cross-checked and compared among the teachers and pupils, and between the teachers and pupils. On other occasions, the teachers and the pupils were approached in other conversational interview sessions where the school climate and effectiveness factors were tackled. Again, the data on these two domains were cross-checked and compared among the teachers and pupils, and between the teachers and pupils. Casual chats and implicit observations of the teachers and pupils outside the classroom were on-going processes.

In this study, documents were mostly derived from within the case school as well as official documents in relation to school practices and the implementation of education policies. Document analysis was done concurrently with the other data gathering instruments.

These data were *decontextualized* and *recontextualized* based on an adapted framework on educational effectiveness particularly focusing on the teaching and learning of the English language at the case school. The framework was adapted from the model of Climate Factors in Educational Effectiveness popularized by Creemers and Reezigt (1999) and it is shown in *Figure 1*.

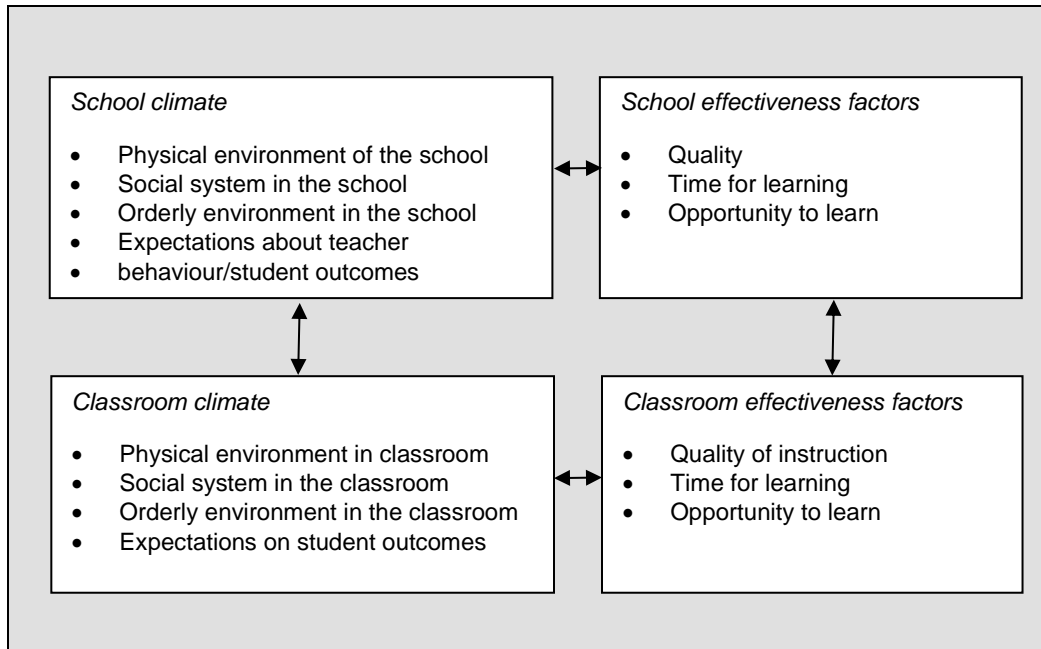


Fig 1 Adapted from “The role of School and Classroom Climate in Elementary School Learning Environment” by B. P. M. Creemers, & G. J. Reezigt, 1999, in H. J. Freiberg (ed.), School Climate: Measuring, Improving and Sustaining Healthy Learning Environments, p. 31.

The *decontextualization* process involved reducing the bulk of data through coding and triangulation according to the four main domains – *school climate*, *classroom climate*, *school effectiveness* and *classroom effectiveness*. The climate factors were refined, based on four general aspects – *physical environment*, *social relationship/system*, *orderliness* and *expectations on student outcomes (and teacher behaviours)*. As for the effectiveness factors, the raw data were furthered scrutinized based on the aspects of *quality (of instruction)*, *time* and *opportunity* provided for teaching and learning of the English language.

The *decontextualization* process which was conducted layer by layer, was crucial in teasing pertinent knowledge claims out of the raw data. This had facilitated the *recontextualization* of the raw data to reach the general findings of this preliminary study. These findings were the basic ingredients in churning out the capacity and capability of the case school which was essential input that assisted me in framing my larger ethnographic study.

SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

The synthesis involved the amalgamation and merging information and data from different sources and findings of the study. This process was done in a comprehensive manner which entailed tagging, patterning and coding of the raw data and helped me look at them from a more holistic perspective to garner a better understanding of the findings. In short, the emergence of the contextualized climate and effectiveness factors helped to coin the initial capacity and capability of the case school which responded to the ultimate goal of my ethnographic fieldwork case study.

The findings helped me to delineate a basic list of capacity and capability of the case school. The list of capacity was deciphered around *Financial Capacity*, *Object/Physical Capacity*, *Time Capacity*,

Human Capacity and Programme Capacity. As for the capability of the case school, it was deliberated and discussed in four main settings – *Physical Setting, Human Setting, Interactional Setting* and *Programme Setting*. Both feebleness and fortes of the school were carefully deciphered. The pertinent issues could be seen arising from human, interactional and programme capacity as well as capability.

For the purpose of this paper, the data and findings on the human and interactional capacity and capability are highlighted as they were the major obstacles especially in the teaching and learning of the English language at this case. It would also help to illustrate how the capacity and capability of the case school was established. The snippet view of the data and findings on the human and interactional capacity and capability is provided in *Appendices 1* and *2* which could be relevant for the ‘consumption’ of those related to teacher education for the teaching and learning of the English Language.

The Human and Interactional Capacity and Capability

The general interactional pattern among stakeholders at the case school was almost all centred on the Head Teacher (HT). In terms of human capacity at the school, the HT, English teachers and pupils possessed some personal qualities, experience, and even feelings of inadequacy which were crucial to be tapped into. However, they were not properly gauged.

The HT at the case school believed in ‘leading by example’ and refrained himself from ‘telling’ the teachers what he wanted them to do.

...I believe in ‘leading by example’...When I am initiating and involving in any task in school, I wish to see voluntary involvement from the teachers to help me in making the school a better place to teach and learn... (CI_HT_02/11/10)

...I normally translate my ‘visions’ into actions... I want the teachers to see the actions themselves... (VOC028_HT_2)

...I believe that by asking the teachers especially in handling voluntary work for the school is a form of force [*‘paksaan’*] ... (VOC024_HT_2)

Hence, there was a block of obstacle which was thwarting the opportunity for better interpersonal communication between the staff at the school. This block of obstacle was generally caused by the school culture which did not advocate open interaction and sharing of ideas. It also resulted from the inability particularly of the HT to break through his personal barriers or beliefs to refrain from transmitting information verbally but through actions. This subsequently deprived the individuals especially the teachers involved in my case of an outlet for sharing not only their ideas but also problems and frustration they were going through. One of the English teachers once lamented,

...there was no discussion...to work collaboratively with panel members on improving ourselves pedagogically...we don’t know where to find help... (VOC025_T3_11)

This example clearly showed limited sharing of ideas and problems among the English teachers academically even though they might demonstrate better cordial relationship socially which were disclosed through some observations at the site,

Relationship among the teachers seemed good and intimate. They shared a lot of jokes together... (FJ_3rd_1)

Once at the staffroom...the teachers were enjoying a downloaded haunted movie together...standing around the laptop and commenting at the same time... (FJ_4th_6)

I discovered that the teachers loved eating. Some teachers usually bought food along the way to school or at the tamu [market] to be shared with everyone in the staffroom...they also loved going to the canteen together even though it had nothing much to offer other than banana fritters and instant noodle (with egg)... and chatted about anything they liked... (FJ_4th_11)

Open interaction was extremely vital especially in a low performing school located at a rural area because nobody would be able to understand the context well enough to initiate any improvement programmes other than those who were close enough to apprehend the phenomena. Even though the pupils were not from very privileged background, they brought with them funds of knowledge to school. According to Ovando, Combs and Collier (2006),

...the child does not arrive at school as a *tabula rasa*...by the time children enrol in school they have had myriad and complex experiences – for example, learning to read a few things on their own;...learning to understand the cultural and social demands placed on them;...and developing the ability to communicate their needs, interests, and ideas...with a wide array of skills that enable them to negotiate life successfully within their community. (p. 412)

Pupils at the case school had their own preferences. Some of them disclosed through a focus group interview on the pupils that they loved teachers to have “casual chitchatting (*‘sembang-sembang’*) before the class starts so that we can feel more relaxed” and “games... to get us into the mood of learning...and make us calm before the lessons...” (FG019_P6_2011).

They were also able to ‘evaluate’ what was good for their learning. They said,

...when teachers question us, we feel challenged... and if we are able to answer, we feel we have reached what teachers want us to be... (FG018_P4_2011)

...last time, an English teacher, Cikgu [name] taught us how to make paper doll... it was interesting... She also put us into groups to compete with each other to get marks... Teacher asked questions and we chose the answers like that [verbally]... Ya, competing... we want to get more marks... (FG018_P5_2011)

...we love it when T3 does story telling with actions...but shy to act la... (FG019_P6_2011)

...Sometimes T3 does tongue twisters... she got us to present during assemblies [they sounded proud] ... (FG019_P6_2011)

They were definitely important reference points and criteria that could be used to help support pupils’ learning and understanding of English especially when teaching aids were scarce at the school. All the verbatims were sourced from various types of data which were clearly depicted in the code of reference at the end of each verbatim. They were made up three parts. The first part indicated the types

of data. The second part depicted the individuals or groups of individuals the data was obtained from. The third part showed the time or page number of the data. *Table 1* below displays the various codes for each of the three parts of the database which the researcher referred to.

Table 1 Codes of Reference for Sources in the Database

Types of Data	Individuals, Groups of Individuals or No. of Site Visit	Time or Page No.
FJ (fieldwork journal)	P1-6 (pupils from Years 1-6)	2009-2011
CO (classroom observation)	T1-11 (teachers at School X)	e.g. 17/08/09
CI (conversational interview)	HT (Head Teacher)	
VOC (formal interview)	1st -7th (No. of site visit)	
FG (focus group interview)		

Owing to the limited interactional opportunity between the pupils and the English teachers, such factors were not commonly tapped into. At this case school, English was a foreign language to the pupils. Therefore, interaction must be induced for pupils to express themselves. Without the opportunity to express, the teachers would not be able to pinpoint the problems pupils were facing in learning the language. This could subsequently impede the teachers to find the right solutions to improve the pupils' problems. Anxiety would too be mounting especially for the weaker one as their learning problems would be accumulating from one year to another.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PAPER

The above discussion is just a small part of the larger scale synthesis conducted on the case school as it was just focusing synthesizing the preliminary data and highlighting one major capacity as well as capability of the school in relation to the teaching and learning of the English language. In order to reach more comprehensive outcomes on the overall capacity and capability, interrelationship of data from various domains as illustrated in *Figure 1* needed to be undertaken. In-depth investigation and collection of data in relation to the four domains namely school and classroom climate as well as school and classroom effectiveness were needed. Hence, ethnographic case study was suggested to be adopted for the issue at this case school.

Ethnographic case study opened an opportunity for a researcher to submerge in the “lived” experience and learn the life of a school community which was under performing and away from the hustle and bustle of the city life. The process of investigating a school in this nature was truly challenging but fulfilling. It gave the researcher who was an outsider a sense of belonging and concern for the happenings at the school. With the frequent visits within a considerably long duration of time, the subjects had the chance to stay better connected to the researcher and this rendered better interaction and trust for more “in-depth” understanding and “thick description” of the issues emerging at the school. According to Creemers and Kyriakides (2015), “effective schooling is seen as a dynamic, on-going process” (p.106). With the on-going investigation over a longer timeframe would provide necessary platform for schools to adapt to the changing context, needs and identify diverse priorities. With the thick data collected, the decontextualization and recontextualization processes would be more holistic and multi-faceted which subsequently enabling the delineation of the capacities and capabilities of the case school to tackle the issue at various angles and perspectives which would assist schools to develop effective improvement strategies based on their own mould.

As reiterated at the earlier part of this paper, every school is unique in its organic and mechanistic characteristics. In other words, there is no factor which is more important than the other. The interrelationship of all factors whether directly or indirectly affecting the issues matters more. By gauging more situational effects of factors affecting the teaching and learning processes, more empirically based evidence can be gathered to facilitate the planning of more relevant improvement programmes. In short, the process of reaching the outcomes matters more than the outcomes themselves. Without the right process, the appropriate outcomes might not be reached!

CONCLUSION

For this paper, it was just focussed on one case school located at one of the local communities at the rural area in Sabah. The issue of generalizability was deemed impossible. However, the issue of transferability and making the findings the parameter for other similar researchers was most likely. Hence, the results of the data interpretation could be handled as ‘signposts’ to raise further questions for interested readers to ponder upon. In point of fact, such ‘signposts’ provided could be used by stakeholders not only from the case school but also educational institutions as parameter for them to start viewing a potential case to plan improvement programmes. This was “a strategy for pointing the way rather than leading the way” (Wolcott, 1994, p. 40) so that more probable suggestions could be made especially for potential researchers and policy implementers.

This information on the capacity and capability of a rustic school would be extremely beneficial for novice English teachers to use as initial reference to carry out more in-depth investigation so that more feasible course of actions could be recommended. Information on the initial capacity and capability of this rustic case study would be extremely beneficial to stimulate their thinking, a way for them to frame a systematic mind-set to start observing a classroom procedure at a school of their own preference instead of groping at the site finding their way to organise their thoughts. It is hoped that the more comprehensive findings synthesized through the larger ethnographic fieldwork study would establish a comprehensive framework which could be an effective guide in navigating the school towards better performance in the achievement of the English language.

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Snippet View of the Synthesis on Human and Interactional Capacity of the Case School

Capacity	Actions/Problems	Reasons
Human Capacity	<i>Community</i>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Realized the aspiration of the school and sent children to school Just physical but not academic help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supportive parents not well-educated and livelihood more important (Context factors)
	<i>The School/HT</i>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Believed in 'leading by example' and refrained from giving verbal instruction but just showing actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack the culture to interact Resulted in suppressed feelings – stressful among teachers But teachers needed directions – conflict of working styles – stressful
	<i>Teachers</i>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sufficient trained teachers with teaching experience but no TESL-trained teachers Low confidence level Seemed to have given up on themselves and pupils when dealing with English Less self-regulation to work independently Lack the drive to keep teaching the subject especially to weaker pupils Strict to the pupils and low expectation of their pupils Good followers of instructions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HT's effort to ensure the pupils are properly looked after Limited linguistic and pedagogical knowledge in English Lack remedial ideas to overcome pupils' learning difficulties Low expectation of pupils to perform
	<i>Pupils</i>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overly controlled in the English language classroom Love coming to school but intimidated by the English subject as they were unable to comprehend Felt frustrated, discouraged and afraid of being punished especially for the weaker ones when not able to handle the tasks given to them Have their own needs and preferences in learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low expectation of the pupils' ability to perform No background knowledge of English at all Lack reasons, motivation and enjoyment to learn the language

Snippet View of the Synthesis on Human and Interactional Capability of the Case School

Capability	Actions/Problems	Reasons
Human/ Interactional setting	<i>School vs community parents</i>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good collaboration on physical improvement on the school but not academic improvement of their children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive parents but not well-educated and livelihood more important (Context factors)
	<i>HT vs pupils</i>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Huge power gap between the HT and pupils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HT felt inadequate to initiate help
	<i>HT vs teachers</i>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack discussion between HT and teachers • Both keep frustration to themselves • Qualities of HT and teachers not tapped into 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack outlet to express • Lack the culture to interact • Teachers were given the autonomy to handle the learning of English and to self-improve as they were trained teachers
	<i>Teachers vs pupils</i>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack interaction with teachers • Weaker pupils got more anxious as keeping problems to themselves too much • Quiet pupils and teachers' strict posture • less monitoring on weak pupils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack the culture and self-regulation to more up close and personal • Insufficient time to monitor all the pupils during class time • Need to cover syllabus • Teachers felt inadequate to help the weak pupils