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An Investigation of the Teaching and Learning Practice of History In Secondary Schools: A Case Study

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Abstract: This qualitative study reveals the Direct Instruction of teaching dominates the practice of the participating History teachers. Consequently, the students learning practice is passive. The teachers' views show their concerns are the reasons underpinning such practice. From the students' voices it is identified that they preferred their teachers to use eclectic and blended approaches in delivering the lesson as they learned through seeing, feeling and doing it. Based on these findings, there is a mismatch occurred between the implementation of the teaching of History with the students' learning preferences.

1. Introduction

The awareness of the importance of history in one's life has brought the Malaysian Ministry of Education to make History as a core subject in the education curriculum. Several improvements have been made since 1989 with the implementation of the Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools (ICSS). With this curriculum, the Malaysian government has upgraded History as a compulsory subject to be learned by every student in secondary schools. The purpose is to produce historically knowledgeable and empathetic students.

There are two levels of learning History in secondary school. The first level is learned in lower secondary school which involves students in form one to form three (13 to 15 years old). At this level there are two components learnt. The first component is the study of the local History. The purpose of this component is to provide students with the experience of doing research. Each student is required to do an outside classroom research based on the themes given in the syllabus. In performing the task students will experience the skills of searching, collecting, categorizing, interpreting and reporting the historical facts they found in their research. Such experience is expected to increase students' interest in learning History.

The second component is learning History in the classroom. This involved students from form one to five. In this component, students are exposed to the Malaysian pre-historical era and the existence of its first civilization, the sultanate of Melaka. Then, students are brought to understand the existence of other civilizations such as the Johor Malay government. The syllabus also covers the glory and the downturn of the civilization, the beginning of the colonial era, the reaction of the locals, the awareness leading to independence and the making of Malaysia.

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The second level is learned in form four to form five (16 to 17 years old). In this level students are learning the history after the formation of the Malaysian Federation, its political, social and economic development, and its relationship with the other world establishment such as the ASEAN and OIC.

To effectively teach History, the Curriculum Development Centre has determined six compulsory elements to be embedded in the teaching. These elements are historical inquiry, material collection, Historical Thinking Skills, historical explanation, historical understanding, and empathy.

2. Statement of Purpose

Literatures on the teaching and learning practice of History in the classroom are abundant. From these literatures two major approaches of teaching and learning of History are identified. The first approach emphasizes on transferring the body of knowledge from the textbook to the students, encouraging students to memorize the body of knowledge, and requiring students to recall the body of knowledge in the examination [1, 2, 3, 4]. The equivalent terms for such teaching are the conventional way [5] and the traditional and didactic teaching [6]. The result of this approach is students are able to master the factual knowledge by memorizing and recalling it during the examination. Students may have good results but Pattiz [7] argues this approach do not encourage students to utilize their thinking skills because they just accept the facts prepared in the textbook and memorize them.

The second approach is teaching History with the concern of investigating historical sources and their evidence [8, 9, 10]. This is also called as the research based [11] and inquiry approach. The advantages of this approach are students learn history using materials, discussing the materials, debating the key issues with friends and teachers, and frequently asking questions. They have the opportunity to inquire like a historian and experience the immediacy of events through primary documents as well as given the opportunities to acquire the skills to construct meaningful interpretations of the past [12, 13].

Based on these two identified approaches I am encouraged to study the teaching and learning practice of History in secondary schools particularly in rural areas in Sabah, Malaysia. In this study I would like to identify the teaching practice of History to understand in which approach does it belong to and to identify the students' learning practice as a response to the teaching practice.

3. Study Objectives

This study is intended to understand the teaching and learning practice of History in secondary school. Thus, the objectives are as follows;
1. To investigate the teaching and learning practice of History in secondary schools.
2. To identify reasons underpinning the teaching practice of History in the classroom.
3. To reveal students' voice about the teaching of History in the classroom.
To obtain these objectives, therefore, the questions are;
1. How History is taught to the students and how students are responding to such teaching?

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2. What are the reasons underpinning the teaching practice of History in the classroom? Why?
3. What is the students' voice about the teaching of History in the classroom? Why?

4. Theoretical Framework

A teacher is responsible in designing and organizing a lesson. Both of these activities are part of a teacher's life [14]. There are many instructional design models that can guide teachers in planning their lessons; the seven step instructions [15], Gagne's nine events of instruction [16], ADDIE instructional design, and ASSURE instructional design. Based on these models, there are five main categories which are essential in a teacher's plan. Firstly, the focus of the lesson; secondly, the presentation of the content; thirdly, the assessment of the lesson; fourthly, the nourishment and reinforcement; and finally the closure of the lesson. By following these categories teachers will be able to plan the lesson comprehensively. A comprehensive lesson plan helps teachers to know exactly what they need the students to achieve, what content should be delivered, how it should be delivered and what indicators for the lesson to be judged as effective.

For organizing a lesson, literatures have suggested the three phases lesson organization. Gagne [17] termed these phases as the pre-instructional phase, the instructional phase and the post-instructional phase. For Burden and Bryd [18] the three phases of the lesson are the lesson introductory, the lesson development and the lesson conclusion. The introductory phase is the phase where teachers gain students' attention, inform the lesson outcome, and retrieve students' previous knowledge. These activities are expected to establish an atmosphere that motivates and sustain students' interest to learn which is vital to make the lesson meaningful [19, 20]. The development phase will look at the teachers' teaching practice in delivering the content of the lesson. Normally, three approaches can be adopted in this phase, the teacher-centred approach [21], the student-centred approach [22], and the eclectic approach [23].The third phase is the conclusion phase. Students should be given the opportunity to place the lesson in their context so they will remember the lesson. Burden and Byrd [24] suggested three activities to be done in this phase, providing closure, summarizing the lesson and getting ready to leave the class.

According to Dunn and Dunn [25] the various teaching approaches should be taken into consideration as students are learning in different ways and have different learning styles. The most common theories for learning style is the VAK theory and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences [26]. Based on these theories students learn through many styles. Thus, teachers need to comply with the students' needs in their teaching practice.

In this study, the instructional design models, the three lesson phases, the VAK theory and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences are used as the theoretical framework to understand the teacher's teaching practice and the students' learning practice of History in the classroom.

5. Methodology

This study determines to understand in-depth the practice of teaching and learning of History in the context of the classroom realities. As such, the data necessary to understand this phenomenon lay with the History teacher and their students. This essentially meant to get the data I have to go to secondary schools where History is taught and teachers and students are found. Data which is

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collected from these people are accurate and best understood because these are the people involved in the phenomenon [27,28]. The collection of data is done through observation of the teachers and student activities in the classroom, interviews, and review of relevant documents. Based on these characteristics, therefore, this is a qualitative case study. A case study is chosen as the research strategy because the phenomenon to be understood is involving secondary schools in the rural area.

I have not predetermined number of participating teachers in this study. I begin the data collection with observing a History teacher and a group of her students in a rural secondary school. As the data have been collected I immediately analyze the data to obtain insights and hunches to focus on the next data collection. Having collected the data from four teachers and four groups of students I saw the data has become saturated where there are no new insights and hunches coming out from further data collection and analysis and the data are also triangulated. These conditions have encouraged me to end the data collection. According to Ritchie and Lewis [29] data saturation is the sign to end certain data collection. At the end of the data collection there are four History teachers and four groups of students involved in this study.

The type of observation in this study is a non-participative observation [30]. My role is to observe the whole process quietly at the back of the classroom. At the same time a video is set up to record the whole process. The observation purpose is to capture the teachers' teaching approaches and the students' learning activities as a response to the teaching practice. To help in capturing the important data an observation protocol [31, 32] has been prepared and used in every observation. There are 12 lesson observations done in the whole study.

After each observation the teachers and the group of students are interviewed separately to get the meaning, their feelings and views of every activity they have performed experienced. To guide with the interview an interview protocol has been prepared. The questions in the protocol are open-ended questions so the participants can talk freely according to what they think and feel. After each interview, I immediately transcribe it and start the analysis to get the points and hunches to bring into the next data collection.

The other data collection strategy is reviewing the document relevance. In this study, I review the History curriculum, the teachers' lesson plan and the students' notes. Each relevant data are written in the review of documentation notes.

In the case of data analysis for this study, the data collected are analyzed immediately. The observation protocols as well as the video recording is checked and watched to get the prominent codes of the teachers' teaching practice. The interview is transcribed to look for the codes to enhance the codes found in the observations. The first codes gathered from the first data collection circle is brought back to the participants to get their approval. In the second round of data collection the same process is repeated until the fourth round where no newer data coming out from the participant. I prefer the simultaneous method of data analysis because the data can be checked and re-checked by the participants.

After all the data collection has been completed, the within case analysis is done. In this analysis I check and re-check all the confirmed codes from all the participants in order to group the codes

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under a relevant category. Once the categories for each participating teacher and participating group of students are identified, the cross case analysis is carried out. In this analysis all the identified categories from each participating teacher and group of students are compared. At this stage the similarities and differences are identified and grouped together and a suitable theme is given to each of these new grouping. Once it has been done then the findings are explained.

6. The Findings

6.1. How History is taught to the students and how students are responding to such teaching?

The finding shows the normal teaching practice of these participating teachers is organized into four phases; the introductory phase, the development phase, the assessment phase, and the conclusion phase. The practice of these participating teachers in the introductory phase is informing the topic of the lesson to the students and asking a few knowledge level questions about the previous lesson to know the students' prior knowledge. The reasons given to such introduction are to provide focus to the students as to secure students' commitment towards the whole teaching process, to make students' learning more meaningful and to enhance students' understanding of the topic.

In the development phase, there are two approaches that have been noticed from the data analyzed. The approaches are the student-centred approach and the teacher-centred approach. The teaching practice commonly found in this phase is asking students to do a self - reading of the textbook, notes writing, discussion and presentation. I categorized these activities as the student-centred approach because the students are fully involved in doing the activities.

The other practice in the process is the explanation. This practice is put under the teacher-centred approach as the teachers dominate the explanation. It is done either after the students' presentation, or after the reading of the textbook session is over. The nature of the explanation is mainly paraphrasing the points of the topic in accordance with the textbook. The students' main activity at this point is listening carefully and try to absorb as much information as possible. The purpose of such explanation as revealed by the teachers during the interviews are to enhance the points the students have presented, to inform the main points of the subtopic the students have read, to elaborate upon the answers given by the students during the question and answer activity, to improve students' understanding of the main points and to cover as much as possible the syllabus within the given period of time for the examination preparation.

The assessment phase is found in one of the participating teachers' practice. This phase is done after the development phase. This teacher assesses her students' acquisition of the content delivered by asking several questions written on a sheet of paper. The students are requested to answer the questions without referring to the textbook or their notes. Once it is done the students are asked to exchange their question paper. The answers are provided by the teacher and the students are asked to mark their friend's answers. This finding showed this particular teacher has done an appropriate way of assessing students' understanding of the topic learned and to assess the learning outcomes. According to Gagne [33] learning outcome must be assessed in a specific activity. For the other participating teachers they assess their students' understanding of the topic and the attainment of the learning outcome simultaneously during the question and answer activity in the development phase. However, based on the observations done, I found it difficult

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to determine whether or not the students have obtained the learning outcomes because the students still referring to the textbook and the notes to get the answers.

In the conclusion phase, the teachers summarize briefly their lesson by mentioning the topic, the subtopics covered and the main points discussed. They also remind the students to make prior preparation for the coming lesson. Finally the teachers acknowledge the students' involvement in the class and encourage them to repeat their involvement in the coming lesson. Reinforcing student involvement is an appropriate activity for the lesson conclusion [34].

As for the whole teaching and learning practice it is found that all the participating teachers use the textbook as their main source in the teaching. The students are also requested to refer to the textbook when they are doing their learning activities. As the result, the teachers and the students have the same points, thus, no argumentative discussion is noticed in the lesson. The explanation is less critical because it is more or less repeating the explanation found in the textbook, which the students already knew. Similarly the questions pose in the question and answer activity are based on the information found in the textbook. This encouraged the student to turn to the textbook to get the answers. Being dependant to the textbook indicates these teachers are concerned with delivering the content of the textbook. Their teaching is more emphasizing on the teaching of the historical facts as found in the textbook. This finding is similar to many previous research findings that revealed History teachers in schools are using textbooks as their main teaching reference [35, 36, 37].

As the consequences of such teaching practice, the cross case analysis reveals the students' learning practice can be grouped into two categories. The two categories are the passive learning and the active learning. The passive learning activities identified are listening to the information, instruction and explanation given by the teachers, taking turns in reading the textbook, referring the textbook to check the points explained by teachers and presented by their friends, copying and completing notes in the notebook or in the workbook provided, and making amendments to the points as requested by the teacher. Their activities are categorized as passive because students acquire the knowledge passively where the information is being absorbed like a sponge by the students. They do not react to the information given to them and thus this is seen as a one sided learning. Bloom [38] categorized these activities as acquiring the knowledge and it covers the lower level of his taxonomy, the knowledge level. The passive learning activities found in this study are not surprising. Such activities encouraged students' passivity and lack of critical acceptance of information [39].

The observation data shows another activity practiced, the discussion. The students are seen discussing either with friends next to them or in a group when they received an assignment from the teacher. In the discussion students are seen answering questions verbally, asking questions to friends, reading and identifying the main points of the topics learned, writing notes based on the identified points, and presenting the points in front of the class. These activities are categorized as active learning as students are physically and mentally alert. These activities encourage students to involve in higher levels of thinking compared to the previous activities.

In conclusion, the teachers in this study transfer the content of the textbook to students through two approaches; the student-centred and teacher-centred approach. The normal practice involves

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reading the textbook, discussing the topic of the lesson based on the textbook, presentation, explanation, and question and answer activity. As a response to this practice, the students are learning History either passively or actively depending on the teachers' practice.

6.2. What are the reasons underpinning the teaching practice of History in the classroom? Why?

The cross case analysis data from the teachers' views reveals several reasons contributing to their teaching practice. The reasons are categorized as self concern, task concern and impact concern. The self concern reason refers to teachers' belief and teachers' behavior. These teachers admit that their teaching practice is based on their past experience as a student. This experience has influenced their belief that their teaching practice is the better practice because they had had good experience with their teachers when they were students. Thus, that belief becomes a strong foundation in their teaching.

The other belief is about their students' ability. These teachers perceive the students' ability as low. This low expectation has been complimented with the limited times these teachers are having in teaching the subject, thus, they initiate most of the teaching activities as discussed above because those activities are faster and do not consume a lot of time to do. The data from this study also show teachers' behavior is also influencing their practice. Their behavior is moved by their motivation which refers to teachers' mood, readiness and willingness to implement other teaching practices. Since these teachers have low expectations of their students' ability therefore they are not motivated to try out new teaching method. These teachers assume that the students will react the same although they are implementing different practices.

On heavily dependant on the textbook, these teachers' beliefs the textbook is highly referred when exam questions are constructed and all answers are derived from the textbook. As such these teachers emphasized the students to write their own notes based on the textbook.
Under the task concern category, the data reveal these teachers' main intention in teaching is to deliver the whole content of the textbook before the examination. The intention to deliver the content has inspired them to keep repeating the teaching activities until it becomes a routine. This routine is kept because their previous experience told them that such practice is efficient in helping them to complete the delivery of the content within the given time frame. Although these teachers are trained but the data show their experiences rule some of our behavior. As Vartuli [40] says the experience was and is the best teacher.

The impact concern refers to the policy and the organization. The policy is again the reason behind these teachers teaching practice. The examination, as the authority has made it compulsory, becomes the goal of the teaching. All the participating teachers show their concern to prepare their students for the examination. Therefore, they emphasize on students' acquisition of the content of the textbook to ensure students will get good marks in the examination. This finding is matched with the finding revealed in the study of History teaching in Japan and Singapore [41, 42].

In the organization's concern, two elements are noticed, the classroom condition and the organizational support. The observation data across the classrooms show the classrooms are arranged in a traditional manner. This manner is unfavour for student-centred activities. It

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encourages teachers to stand in front of the class and give an explanation or students come to the front to give their presentation. In terms of support, these teachers admit they have less opportunities to take any courses related to the teaching of History. This constraint has kept teachers from being up to date with the recent development in the teaching of History. I believe this might have contributed to the teachers' resistance to change their ways of teaching.

Clearly, the reasons underpinning these teachers' teaching practice are holistic as it comes from the teachers themselves which is categorized as the self concern; the requirement of the syllabus to complete the content within the given time frame which is categorized as task concern; and the policy as well as the support of the organization which is categorized as the impact concern. No one should take the blame alone for such teaching practice.

6. 3. What are the students' voice about the teaching of History in the classroom? Why?

From the students' side, the data show students are not in favour with their teachers' teaching practice. They do not like the passive learning they are practicing. For them it caused headaches, sleepiness and boredom. Furthermore, they agree they do not understand the knowledge their teacher tried to convey, although they realize it is important for their examination. The students' data also reveal although the textbook is the teachers' main reference in the class they claim it is inadequate to give them an understanding of the topic learnt.

Data from the students show they can accept their teachers' current teaching practice as such practice prepare them for the examination. However, these students prefer teachers to involve them actively in the process. Clearly, these students prefer learning through active psycho-motor involvement. According to them, they prefer learning by seeing and doing not just listening. Therefore, teachers are requested to visualize the lesson content through mind mapping and do a power point presentation. Other than that these students prefer their teachers involve them actively in the teaching process so they will have fun during the teaching and learning process. They want to be given the opportunities to look for the content from references other than the textbook and present them to the class. This request indicates that these students also prefer hands-on activities. Lastly but not least, the data has also shown these students prefer the teaching is done with the aid of technology. Clearly this means the blended strategy is preferred.

Students active involvement in the process of teaching and learning allows their thinking to be stimulated and the construction of the knowledge can be encouraged [43](Chickering and Gamson, 1988). The data from the students reveal that the active learning activities promoted their higher level of thinking and at the same time they are having a great time in learning. This finding indicates that these students despite being rural students are ready to participate in more active activities, which they believe can stimulate their higher level of thinking.

7. Discussion

The findings presented above explain the 'what', 'how' and 'why' and the 'so what' or the consequences of the teaching practice. 'What' the teachers are doing in the classroom is more to deliver the content of the textbook to the students. 'How' it is done is through student-centred and teacher-centred approaches. 'Why' it is done like that is because of the concern which can be categorized as the self concern, task concern and impact concern. These findings reveal these

History teachers are the main actor in the teaching practice. They structure and guide the learning because they have a clear mind of how to go about it. They determine the topic according to the textbook, explain the content, and monopolize the explanation. These teachers have made such practice as a routine. Such teaching is very straightforward. These features are similar to that of the Direct Instruction teaching which Joyce et al. [44] has grouped under the behavioural teaching theory. Pattiz [45] agree that this teaching model is still the dominant mode in the instruction for History.

Finally, the 'so what' which refer to the consequences of such teaching practice is students are learning more passive than active. This learning practice is not favoured by these students because they have higher expectations of their teacher. They prefer interesting activities throughout the teaching practice is carried out, more books are referred and the explanation and presentation are complimented with the use of technology. The mismatch exists between the teachers' practice with the students' preferences because these students are a mixture of visual, auditory and kinesthetic-tactile learners. This finding conforms to Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory [46]. The data about the current teaching practice in these secondary schools show it primarily cater the learning preferences of the auditory learners only. Obviously, this finding requires a change in these teachers' teaching practice. They need to comply with the students' preferences to help students learn and understand History better. It is hoped that more research will be done in the future to look for a better way of teaching History that may be able to cover all types of learners.

8. Conclusion

Having understood the actuality in the teaching and learning practice of History and the factors contributing to its existence, this study sees a call for improvements. The student's voice clearly spells such need. The teachers' option to use the same teaching practice over and over again has made these students lose their thrill in learning History, thus, they get little benefit from the present teaching practice. These teachers have to acknowledge and fulfill the students' preferences to get them learn, understand and practice History better. They have to realize overemphasizing a single strategy in teaching is now inadequate to tackle students' learning preferences. If such teaching practice persists it will eventually affect students' motivation to learn History. These teachers need to face the challenge to change their long comfy Direct Instruction practice in the classroom. The suggestions offered by the students in this study are worth to be considered. They give ideas to turn the teaching and learning practices into a more exciting, refreshing, stimulating students' thinking, and thus, more meaningful to students' present lives. These findings are in time to be resolved as the Malaysian government has made History as a compulsory subject to be passed in the Malaysian Certificate of Education examination (equivalent to O Level) beginning this year.

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