



## Implementing the Buddy Support System in School: A Case Study

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### Introduction

On 19 July 2002, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir bin Mohamed made the official announcement that Mathematics and Science are to be taught in the English Language as from January 2003. The immediate challenge was getting more than 20,000 Mathematics and Science teachers (MSTs) of Primary Year 1, Secondary Form 1 and Lower 6 ready to teach these subjects in English within the next six months.

The Ministry of Education entrusted the strategies of training these MSTs to the newly established English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC). The training course is popularly known as the English for Teaching Mathematics and Science (ETeMS) Course comprising two phases of training.



To date, two cohorts of MSTs had completed this ETeMS course. The first cohort of MSTs began teaching Mathematics and Science in English for Primary Year One, Secondary Form One and Lower Six in all schools throughout the country. The study addresses the question: “To what extent are the MSTs who had gone through the ETeMS Course, proficient and competent enough to deliver Mathematics and Science lessons in English?”

### **Definitions of terms**

The Buddy Support System is defined as:

*.....simply pairing up with another person for mutual support of goals. Usually buddies take turns calling upon each other. During each call each person reports on their progress since the last call and their plans until the next call.*

*(<http://www.buddybasics.htm>)*

A buddy is defined as any mathematics/science teacher who is not proficient in English and thus is very much in need of ongoing personal support and mutual encouragement.

A critical friend is defined as an English teacher or a mathematics/science teacher who is proficient in English that provides the buddy the necessary support and encouragement.

### **Rationale and Significance**

ELTC conceptualised and introduced BSS to schools nationwide. The rationale for the implementation of BSS includes:

- Switch in medium of instruction
- Pedagogically competent
- Linguistically challenged
- Language support courses
- Materials and
- Resource person

Up to date, no study has been conducted to ascertain the extent to which BSS has been successfully implemented in schools. Information is lacking on how the MSTs and the critical friend perceived about the system in school.



The findings of this study will be useful to:

- The School Division and the Teacher Education Division, Ministry of Education in supporting the BSS;
- The state and district education department officers who play a major role in co-ordinating training, disseminating information and identifying the right teachers as trainers and critical friends;
- The school principals/headmasters who monitor the progress of the BSS system, set up the necessary support structures at the school level and give due recognition to the teachers involved in the BSS;
- The Heads of both the Language and Mathematics/Science Departments in schools who co-ordinate meetings between the critical friend and the MSTs or the buddies;
- The Critical Friend (CF) who is the resource person and helper in supporting the buddy; and
- The MSTs or the buddies who must equip themselves linguistically to be more competent teachers.

### **Limitations**

As this case study is only confined to one school, its findings cannot be generalised for other schools.

### **Methodology.**

An unstructured interview format (Bell, 1987) was chosen because of its adaptability. Three sets of unstructured interview questions were prepared to elicit responses from subjects comprising of five secondary teachers from the same school, namely, two critical friends (Appendix 1), two buddies (Appendix 2) and a Form Two Mathematics teacher (Appendix 3). All the interviews were conducted individually. The interview data served as the qualitative data for the study.

### **Data Collection Procedure.**

In the interview, a cassette player was used to record the responses. In addition, short notes were taken for purpose of further clarification of particular opinions given.



## **Findings and discussions.**

### ***Critical Friends***

(a) Puan Yeap Siew Mei

Puan Yeap is the initiator of the BSS in this school. She is an approachable, dynamic and energetic lady with 23 years of teaching experience. She is also the Head of the Mathematics Panel in the school.

#### *How is BSS carried out in the school?*

Puan Yeap said that BSS was carried out formally and informally but not collegially or collaboratively. The reason for not being able to carry it out collaboratively was the difficulty of finding a synchronised time-table among the teachers involved. As the BSS was only introduced in the middle of the year, she did not want to revamp the school schedule. Nevertheless, she would see to that when the school prepares for the 2004 time-table. In setting up the BSS, she approached and had discussions with the school administrators, namely, the principal, the senior assistants and the Head of the Mathematics and Science Department. Then, she called for a meeting with the CFs and the buddies.

#### *Formal meetings*

In the official implementation of BSS, a meeting was conducted by Pn Yeap whereby four CFs (three English Language teachers and Puan Yeap herself) were identified to guide four buddies (MSTs from Cohort 1 of ETeMS training). This was done at the ratio of one critical friend to one buddy. According to Puan Yeap, this was the best support for the buddies as it provided ample opportunity in developing both the buddies' language learning and speaking skills. Furthermore, she believed that the buddies would not want their weaknesses to be made known to everyone in the school. Puan Yeap said in the interview,

*“...I explained to them the meaning of BSS. The main aim is to help them. I tell them that they shouldn't be offended, shouldn't be shy to ask. And then because we have it at one to one basis, I said that it is confidential between the two of them. We won't go and tell somebody else ...”*



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A file was distributed to each CF to document all the meetings held between the CF and the buddy. This was to keep a record on the progress of the buddies. The main focus for the documentation was on the buddy's usage of the self-instructional courseware kit provided by MoE, namely, the Dyn-Ed, Grammar Rom CDs and Betty Azar's Grammar books. This record would show the frequency of help rendered by the CF and the development of the buddies in enhancing themselves through the use of the kit. The CFs need not spend too much time writing a report as Puan Yeap had provided some forms in the file. What the CFs had to do was just to write a few lines in the given columns as shown below:

No.	Date	Duration	Problem	Solved	To be carried forward	Signature of Critical Friend	Signature of buddy

When asked on why the columns "Solved" and "To be carried forward" were included in the form, Puan Yeap explained that sometimes the problem on the translation of terminology could not be solved at that point of time in the meeting and thus needed to be carried forward to another day. However, she went on to clarify that most of the problems could be easily solved except when it involved the usage of the CDs in the kit.

The formal meetings between the CFs and the buddies were carried out as explained by Pn Yeap:

*"... I just distributed out the work to the English teachers (CFs). So, they would make an arrangement with their buddies to see when would be the best time to see them. They would refer to their timetable, tell them (the buddies) when they (CF) would be free..."*



### *Informal meetings*

I have earlier mentioned that the informal meetings seemed to be more interesting and valid than the formal ones. As Puan Yeap put it,

*“... most of the time, the buddy would stop us halfway at the corridor, by the staircase, or even in the canteen. We don’t have to check the timetable, I mean, we were just stopped on our way to classes to ask for some clarification...”*

From here I could see that the CFs were willing to lend the buddies a helping hand as when and where they could. This support system did not confine the CFs to guide the MSTs at specific time or at a fixed venue. Although the CFs had arranged a specific time for the buddies to see them formally for the clarification of language items, the informal meetings indirectly fostered better relationship between both parties.

Puan Yeap claimed,

*“...we don’t record these informal and short meetings which usually lasted for only a minute or two. And usually they will come with minor problems with translation and asking for meaning of words...it is only when they encountered serious problems such as understanding materials from Betty Azar’s Grammar books, Dyn-Ed and Grammar-Rom, that they have specific meeting with the CFs.”*

Although a file was distributed to each CF, they did not have to carry those files with them all the time. The CFs should not feel burdened in carrying out the system by reporting on each and every account of the help given to the buddies. The BSS is a support for MSTs, and they should feel free to ask whenever they need help. This also does not mean that when a CF is assigned to help a specific buddy, the buddies should also feel free to ask any of the identified CFs at any time of the day. In the school working environment, every teacher has tonnes of workload waiting to be settled every now and then. Thus, having to help the buddies in the informal way is a good method to keep the support going, as Puan Yeap put it,

*“... in the informal way, it is done at the ratio of one to all and not the fixed one to one...”*



The BSS system is effective when both, the CFs and the buddies have a good rapport with each other. Puan Yeap personally felt that the buddies in her school were willing to come forward and ask for help. They were neither shy nor intimidated. In fact, the buddies were open-minded. Moreover, there was no time constraint in carrying out the support system as the buddies and the CFs were to meet whenever a need arises.

*“...whenever the buddy is in need or encountering some problems with translation and terminologies they would go and see the CFs to get the necessary.”*

This section looks at the perceptions of the other critical friend who had been identified to help the MSTs in the same school towards the BSS system.

(b) Puan Ng Choon Mui.

Puan Ng is an English Language teacher in the school with 20 years of teaching experience. Pn Ng only talked about the informal help which she had given to her buddy. She had no constraints what so ever in giving helping the buddy. However she only rendered her help when she was approached by the buddy. She did not take the initiatives and extra effort to look after the buddy.

Puan Ng's record-keeping showed that all her help to the buddy focused on translation problems encountered by the buddy and none at all on learning English for self-development or self-improvement.

### **The Buddies.**

(a) Cik Fadzillah Rafiza bt. Ibrahim

Cik Fadzillah Rafiza bt. Ibrahim is a sixth form Science teacher. She had her primary education in Bahasa Melayu. Thus the current switch in the medium of instruction in TeSME poses a major problem to her.

Cik Fadzillah is a jovial and optimistic person who would always take the initiatives to see her CF (Pn Caroline a/p Joseph). She had no reservations at all as would seek help in all aspects from clarification of terminologies to pronunciation. Her main problem was on formulation of examination questions. Cik Fadzillah's commented on BSS,



*“...I always see Pn Carol when I come to a new word. I want to know the meaning and how to pronounce it correctly. ...Why must we feel shy? For myself, even though if there was no BSS, I would still ask for help.”*

(b) Cik Azma Azniza bt. Azan

A Mathematics graduate by profession, Cik Azma is also teaching the Lower Sixes. A total reverse of Cik Fadzillah's character, she does not speak much. I could sense that she is lacking the oral competency thus making her difficult to respond to the interview questions. She tried to answer but words just did not come out, therefore she reverted to the national language. Nevertheless, Cik Azma who is Puan Yeap's buddy, is positive about BSS. She admitted that she is weak in the grammar and has been seeing her CF with the assess kit to further improve her English proficiency. At the end of the interview she said, *“...boleh diteruskan sepanjang masa...”*

Now, both buddies in this school accepted the support system with open arms. Still we could see the differences; one is willing to speak the language though not fluent while the other is fighting for words to say a sentence. No matter what the scenario is, I am convinced that as long as we are optimistic about changes, then we are having the right attitude to improve ourselves. At the end of the day, both buddies will definitely be able to deliver their lessons confidently in English. It is just a matter of time to determine who will make it first.

(c) Pn Dally Rosita bt. Abd. Rahman

Pn Dally Rosita bt. Abd. Rahman is a Form Two Mathematics teacher who has completed the ETeMS training. She commented,

*“...I think there should be support... I need someone to talk. I need someone to share my idea, someone to show how to pronounce words I don't know...I want to improve my English...er...er...then I can be confident to teach next year.”*

### **The support from the school administrators.**

It was a surprise to learn that the principal of the school did not pay much attention to the BSS system event though he knew about ETeMS,. This non-involvement could be inferred from the interview with the five teachers. The only administrator giving them support was the Head of the Science/Mathematics Department.



### **Recommendations**

All school principals should brief everyone in the school, from the teachers to the students on the importance of ETeMS. The usage of English as the language of communication should not be restricted to only English and MSTs teachers. Everyone in the school ought to be given ample opportunity to use the English Language. With the full support from the school head, more activities in English can be conducted. As the spoken language and pronunciation are the main problems for teachers and students, activities that cater to these two language skills should be designed and conducted.

Among the activities mentioned is the usage of English during assembly. This will provide good chances for teachers to use English and hence will somehow help to improve their speaking ability. Though every school has announced that certain days of the week is “English Day”, there is no activity or function to promote the use of English. Perhaps, the announcements for that day can be carried out in English. Then, students and teachers are encouraged to use the English language in conducting the all extra-curricular activities or meetings. However, all these could not be done if there is no support from the top level.



Appendix 1

**Interview questions for the Critical Friends.**

Name of interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Department: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Venue: \_\_\_\_\_

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Prompt:

1. I understand that you are a critical friend in your school for the Buddy Support System. Can you share with me how you go about doing it?
2. May I know how do you manage the time?
3. Can you elaborate on the buddies' reaction towards this support system when it was first implemented in the school?
4. Can you show me how you documented the proceedings of the meetings between you and the buddies?
5. What are the problems that you have encountered in the implementation of Buddy Support System in the school?
6. I would also like to know about the support given by the administrators in this school. What roles do they play in this support system?
7. In your opinion, how can we make the Buddy Support System better?

*End of questions*



Appendix 2

**Interview questions for the Buddies.**

Name of interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Department: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Venue: \_\_\_\_\_

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Prompt:

1. I came to know that you have good critical friends in your school who can offer help when you faced problems in your instructional language or during your preparation for your class.  
Can you share with me how do you go and seek help from them?
2. What is your personal opinion on the Buddy Support System?
3. Can you elaborate how did your colleagues, the Mathematics and Science teachers' react towards the BSS system when it was first implemented in the school?
4. What are the problems that you encountered in the teaching of Mathematics/Science in English?
5. I would also like to know about the support given by the administrators in this school. How do they play their role in this support system?
6. In your opinion, how can we make the Buddy Support System better?



Appendix 3

**Interview questions for the Form Two Mathematics Teacher.**

Name of interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Department: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Venue: \_\_\_\_\_

Topic: \_\_\_\_\_

Prompt:

1. I came to know that you have undergone the ETeMS training recently and you will be teaching Form Two Mathematics next year in English. In your opinion, is the training enough to prepare you for your teaching next year or do you still need help and support?
  
2. The English Language Training Centre has introduced a system called the Buddy Support System to help the Mathematics and Science teachers in enhancing their language proficiency. Would you like to participate in this system?
  
3. How would you like this Buddy Support System to help you?

*End of questions*



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