

## **HOW CRITICAL ARE CRITICAL FRIENDS? AN INITIAL STUDY ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BUDDY SUPPORT SYSTEM**

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### **Introduction**

The policy to change the medium of teaching in Maths and Science from Bahasa Malaysia to English called for nationwide training of Maths and Science teachers and the implementation of support programmes. The Buddy Support System was an initiative undertaken jointly by the English Language Centre (ELTC) and the Teacher Education Division (TED) to provide help and support for teachers who face challenges with this switch in the medium. This paper begins with a brief description of the rationale and framework of the programme and the training of critical friends. The second part of the paper gives some insights into the initial implementation of the programme in two primary schools in Melaka. The paper also attempts to discuss some emergent issues that may influence training and the implementation of the system in schools.

### **Rationale**

In the past there had been support systems initiated by the Schools Division of the Ministry of Education to help English language teachers in underachieving schools. One such support programme was the Teacher Support Team (TST) which was set up in the early 1990s. Under this scheme, experienced teachers were identified as key personnel and trainers and they played the role of mentors and advisors to English language teachers teaching in challenging contexts. The programme faced various constraints in its implementation. One of these was the fact that the school culture was not ready to receive such a system as teachers had not reached a level of collegiality and collaboration for them to work with the support teachers. Also for such a system to work, there must be support from school administrators and other key players in the Ministry.

When the idea of a support programme for Maths and Science teachers teaching in English was first mooted, ELTC was aware that for such a support programme to work, it needed to take into account various factors. We are aware that there are many teachers who studied and trained to teach Science and Mathematics under a system which used Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction. While these teachers are pedagogically competent, some of them would face difficulties in using teaching Maths and Science through another language.

Although these teachers have attended language courses such as English for the teaching of Maths and Science (ETeMS) and provided with courseware to support their own learning, we realize that it was necessary to have a resource person there on the “spot” to help teachers. This teacher or better known as “critical friend” (CF) would be available as a consultant-friend to help Maths and Science teachers informally within the school environment. Teachers who faced problems with the language could immediately seek out the “critical friend” in the staff room and get immediate help. It was felt that the resource personnel

should come from among the teachers in the school and for that reason, the programme is school based.

Maths and Science teachers teaching in English were provided with laptops, LCDs and courseware to support them in their learning and teaching. However, many of these teachers and school administrators have not been inducted into the use of ICT and courseware. It was thus not surprising to find some of these equipment and materials under “lock and key” as head teachers and teachers had little idea on how to use them. It was hoped that the CF would help teachers to navigate some of the courseware and materials. It was found that these materials provided a very natural springboard for teachers to work collaboratively.

### **The Framework**

The “Buddy System” aims to set up a collaborative support structure in each school. It comprises a teacher who acts as a “critical friend” (CF) to “buddies” that is teachers who are learning to teach Maths and Science in English. The CF can be either an English language or a Maths or Science teacher who is competent in English. The CF supports the Maths and Science teachers in the learning and use of English in the classroom. It must be noted that the function of the CF is to help and advise the teacher in the use of the language and not necessarily the methodology of teaching Maths and Science. The ideal CF however would be a Maths and Science teacher who is competent in the English language as he/she can provide help in the content as well as the language. This concept of support is based on Egan’s (1994) model where teachers explore, experiment and use the English language and the CF would help to verify, improve and extend that use. The aim of the process is to provide teachers with the skills and knowledge to solve their own language learning

The CF must be a person who is competent in English and his job is to make himself available to assist the teacher in the new curriculum initiative. His role is one of advisor, consultant and supportive colleague and the agenda is initiated by the “buddies” This is not a one to one relationship but rather a relationship that is built with small groups of teachers so as not to be too threatening. To put the system in place, a more formalized structure is advocated at the initial stages and as it develops, it can take on a less formal and more collaborative structure. The school head teacher is also a key player as he/she provides the leadership in the management of this curricular innovation.

### **Training of Critical Friends**

The training of master trainers was carried out nationwide. The country was divided into 6 zones and the training was carried out at one centralized location for each zone. A total of 176 master trainers were trained. Subsequently these trainers went back to their respective states to conduct training for “Critical Friends”. Trainers from colleges and schools jointly carried out the training for Maths and Science teachers to equip them with the skills for helping their “buddies”. The course content included *My Learning Journey*, *People helping skills*, *the Use of Courseware and Issues and Challenges*. The critical friends were also introduced to the concept and process of monitoring and they had to come up with an action plan at the end of the course for implementation of the BSS in their respective schools. With

the help of the learning contract, the CF can collaborate and negotiate with their buddies to achieve their goal of building up their language skills of Science and Maths.

### **Implementation at the School Level**

Earlier at the state level training in Melaka in July 2003, I had already made contacts with two teachers whom I had identified for my case studies. Initially I had some difficulty identifying these teachers as many of them did not fulfill the criteria I had set for my study. Firstly I did not want a school with a small population of below 500 students as the number of English, Maths or Science teachers would be negligible and thus would not facilitate my study. Secondly I wanted to ensure that it was not an urban school where English is widely used. I assume that the need for the Buddy Support System would be more critical in rural schools. Schools in Melaka were largely urban and the rural schools have very small student populations. Finally I managed to identify two schools which fitted the criteria required.

I visited the schools two months later in September after the system had been implemented. In keeping with the case study approach, data was obtained from interviews with the key players involved in this programme and from my own observations and diary entries as well. In order to understand and interpret certain phenomena related to the implementation, it is necessary to provide a detailed context in which the participants are situated (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). For purposes of anonymity I have used pseudonyms for schools and people involved in this study.

#### ***School A: Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Ujong***

Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Ujong is a primary school located near an army camp. It had its beginnings in 1908 as a Malay Boys' School. The 2 rows of single storey wooden building bear testimony to the school's history. The new block was ready in 1995. The school is located by the side of the road, on an elevated site with limited grounds. The immediate concern which came to my mind was the danger it posed to young children who had to cross the roads at peak times like school arrival and dismissal times.

At present, this co-educational school has an enrolment of 950 students the majority of whom are Malays (95%) with the exception of a few Indian students. Most of the students are from the surrounding camp area of Sungai Ujong and the rest from the housing estates nearby. There are 25 classes, 4 years 1-5 classes and 6 year 6 classes with a total enrolment of 950 pupils. The vacant post for head teacher of the school was filled in 2002 by Puan Nurulyati who was transferred from a premier school in Kuantan, Pahang to SK Sungei Ujong. There are 45 teachers, 42 Malays and 3 Chinese. 7 are TESL trained in this school.

According to the headmistress, 40 % of the children come from the army camp nearby and 10% of them have parents working in Petronas which has a branch office situated near the school. The other 50% are from the lower economic income group. She related an account of a family who had moved from Singapore. According to her the children had a good command of the English language when they joined the school. As time passed, she noticed the first child declined in her language achievement and Pn Nurulyati believes that it was caused by the low standard of English in this school.

She expressed concern that the English results for UPSR (Year 6 Exam) last year was less than 50 % and it dragged down the other results. She is trying to focus on improving the English results for this year. The school organizes extra English classes for Year 6 students from 1 to 2 pm everyday. Teachers are paid for extra classes that are conducted on Saturdays for the Year 6 students. According to Ms Lee, students are not interested in English and do not do the homework that is given to them. Most of the Malay students say that they have to go for religious classes after school (mengaji) and there is homework to be done for these religious classes which take priority over other homework.

### ***Key Players***

#### *The Critical Friend: Miss Lee*

Miss Lee joined SK Sungai Ujong in Dec 1992. She was a TESL trained teacher from one of the teacher training colleges in Perak where she was trained for primary schools. Currently she's studying for her B.Ed TESL through distance learning (PJJ). After training, she was posted to a school in Kelantan for 5 years where she said she was very comfortable with the surroundings and working with predominantly Malay teachers. This was a plus point for her as in the present school, she can boast of having a good rapport with the other teachers. She is currently teaching 23 periods of English and 2 periods of Art in 2 Year 2 classes and 1 Year 5 class. When I visited her school in September 2003, Miss Lee had been back 2 months after attending the centralized training in July. She is also the teacher in charge of data (guru maklumat) and correspondence with the state education office via e-mail. When asked if she had used the courseware that she was exposed to at the earlier training session, she said that she needed to familiarize herself with them before introducing them to the Maths and Science teacher. She says that although she is fairly computer savvy herself, she did not have the time to do so.

She informed me that even before the Buddy Support System was put in place, a few of the Maths and Science teachers had approached her for help. When asked if she had formalized the BSS, she said that she had set up a loose structure of setting appointment dates and plans to implement the action plan and contract soon. However she has briefed the Head of the English Panel and has met with the Maths and Science teachers to discuss grammar points that needed clarification such as the use of the article "a" and "an". Miss Lee said that Maths and Science teachers in her school had problems with writing procedures in complete sentences when writing their record books. She advised them to copy sentences from workbooks and offered to help them to write instructions. Science teachers had problems with pronunciation of terminology while Maths teachers had problems with singular and plural nouns and subject verb agreement (e.g. She has..., they have...). She explained the differences to them and photocopied materials for them.

She talked about the difficulty of setting up appointments as teachers were either teaching in the classroom or busy marking books. So far they have only managed to meet informally in the library. Miss Lee also plans to give workshops and seminars for the Maths and Science teachers. She has also briefed the school head whom she said was very supportive and encouraging. This was confirmed when I met up with the head teacher later.

*The Head Teacher: Pn Nurulyati*

Pn Nurulyati has been in the school for 9 months after she asked for a transfer back to her home state. A very gentle and approachable person, Puan Nurulyati is in her early forties and has a diploma from Universiti Institut Teknologi Mara. From my interview with her, Pn Ainon showed much concern over the English results saying that she checks the results after each monthly test. Most parts of the interview were conducted in English and she switched to Bahasa Melayu when she was not comfortable in English. She also talked about the English programme CONSENT that she had carried out successfully in her former school in another state and is encouraging English teachers in this school to carry out a similar programme to enhance the teaching and learning of English. She had a point reward system for students if they succeeded in making a number of simple, compound and complex sentences and produce new vocabulary. She aims for quality and not for quantity in the results. According to her, Maths and English are the “killer subjects”. She ensures that prefects make announcements in English during assembly once a week. She designates a day every Wednesday as English day where use of English is encouraged for that day in the week. She persuaded me to observe two of her teachers whom she felt lacked confidence in carrying out their lessons in English. In spite of my telling her that I was not there for that purpose, I was coaxed into doing it.

*The Buddies: Puan Shanizah and Pn Rozita*

I interviewed two of the buddies. One of them was Puan Shanizah who taught Science in Years 5 and 6. She had completed the 15 days of ETeMS training for phase 1. She will be attending Phase II from 22-23 August. The other was Puan Rozita who taught Maths and Science in Years 1 and 4. I conducted the interview with them in BM as they seemed to be more comfortable in that medium. When asked about the challenges they faced teaching in English, Pn Shamzinah said that if she speaks in English, the weak students do not understand. She switches between English and Bahasa Melayu. In her own words she says “Saya akan gunakan Bahasa Melayu untuk menerangkan mengikut situasi”

Puan Rozita said she used minimal English in the class as she was not very confident of her English. When I observed her Year 1 Maths class where her lesson was on “Time”, I noticed that she used minimal English. As a result, she was not able to convey the concept of time clearly across to the students. It was not just the language but the methodology that she was lacking in as a Maths teacher.

***School B: Sekolah Rendah Taman Bukit***

This is a primary school housed in a fairly modern and new building, one of those pre-fabricated new school buildings. It has a student population of 1484 with Malays making up 95% of the total student population. Only 5 % comprised of Indians and Chinese. There are 60 teachers on the staff and 12 temporary teachers who are untrained. The students come mainly from 3 neighbouring housing estates where government servants live while other residents are from the corporate sector. Although it is physically located about 10 km from Melaka town, there is little use of English for communication among teachers and students.

Most of these parents speak Malay at home and English is hardly used. There is a Petronas Centre nearby and some families come from these homes. So there is quite a mix when it comes to socio-economic background. The headmaster, Tuan Haji Rosman said that he was thinking of conducting workshops for the teachers but many of them were unwilling to stay back after school. Working Saturdays were staff development days. The results of the school had improved from 2002 to 2003, for English, 44% to 64.2. % , Maths 78.9 % to 98.3 % and Science 77.1% to 97.2 %. Additional classes in all subjects are conducted for Year 6 students before and after school. Students are trained in techniques of answering exam questions for the UPSR.

### ***Key Players***

#### *The Critical Friend: Mr Wong*

Mr Wong is in his mid forties and he was trained as a TESL teacher in one of the teacher training colleges in Ipoh. He has had 21 years of teaching experience but had all these years been teaching Maths in Bahasa Melayu. It was not surprising therefore that he sounded rather apprehensive about teaching English and having to play the role of a critical friend added to his “fears”. When I first met Mr Wong at the Buddy Support training in Melaka, I found out that he was a Baba (Straits born Chinese) who spoke very fluent Bahasa Melayu but no Hakka (his mother tongue). He told me that his wife was working in another country and that he was assuming the role of father and mother for his children in his wife’s absence.

I could see he had no problem relating to his colleagues as he was friendly and approachable. When asked what he had done since he came back from the Buddy Training, he informed that he had briefed the headmaster and heads of panels for English, Maths and Science. He had also conducted an in-house training session for members of the English panel in the school and for all the staff during the Staff Development Programme. He showed me the forms that he had prepared for recording appointment with teachers and he had distributed them to all the Maths and Science teachers. When asked what kind of help was given to these teachers, Mr Yong said that the Science teachers had some problems with subject verb agreement and with vocabulary. The Maths teachers had some difficulties with translation from BM to English e.g. “factor asas tambah”.

My Wong teaches English in Years 4 and 6. His other duties included being the secretary for the UPSR English programme and he is also the teacher in charge of volleyball. I was informed that Year 6 students were given extra classes. Although some English was spoken among the English language teachers, BM was more commonly used by them. He observed that there were attempts by ETeMS teachers to use English at a social level. There are 7 ETeMS teachers in the school, 4 of whom he assessed as fairly competent in the language and 3 lacking in language proficiency.

#### *The Head Teacher: Tuan Haji Rosman*

Tuan Haji Rosman has been the head of this school for the past two years. He says that he is in the know about ETeMS and the Buddy Support System, as a group of primary head teachers had been briefed by the State Education Office. He expressed his concern that there

is a critical need for 3 teachers in his school. He briefed me about the results last year and was happy that the results for the critical subjects had improved but he would want to strive for better results in the UPSR especially for English. He said that there were students in his school who go for English tuition after school. He has set aside working Saturdays for professional development and he has planned for CFs and buddies to meet if there is a need to.

*Buddies: Puan Deborah and Puan Zurinah*

I interviewed two of the buddies Puan Deborah and Puan Zurinah. Puan Deborah was trained in a college in Sarawak and has taught for 9 years. She teaches Maths and Science in Year 1. She told me that one area of difficulty she faced was asking questions and writing procedures in English. She has consulted the CF on a number of occasions when she had some difficulties with the language. She had a fairly good command of English and appeared to be confident as a teacher. When I observed her Maths class later, she proved herself to be so.

Puan Zurinah who teaches Maths and Science in Year 1 said that she uses “dwi bahasa” (two languages) in her teaching. She was not as confident as Puan Deborah and was rather reticent when interviewed. She says that she would highlight the important words in Bahasa Melayu words such as “sejuk” (cold) and she uses a fair amount of translation.

## Analysis

For the purpose of analysis, I will draw out some similarities and differences between these two schools. An analysis of this nature will allow for issues to surface. Some of these issues will be discussed in the last part of this paper.

<i>Schools</i>	<i>Similarities</i>	<i>Differences</i>
<p><b>School A</b> <i>S.K. Sungei Ujong</i></p>	<p><b>School</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semi-urban schools</li> <li>• Students and teachers predominantly Malays</li> <li>• 50 % of students from lower socio-economic background</li> <li>• Little English spoken at home or in school</li> </ul> <p><b>Critical Friend</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experienced and senior teachers</li> <li>• Committed to cause</li> <li>• Good rapport and working relationship with colleagues</li> </ul>	<p><b>School</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bigger student population</li> <li>• UPSR results better in School B</li> <li>• Some students in School B take English tuition after school</li> <li>• Students in School A spend more time at religious classes</li> </ul> <p><b>Critical Friend</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CF in School A has more experience as an English teacher and is upgrading herself professionally</li> <li>• CF in School B has formalized structure for BBS</li> <li>• School B has more TESL trained teachers and hence a bigger pool of CFs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>School B</b> <i>S.K. Taman Bukit</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have met with buddies formally and informally</li> <li>• Aware of their roles as CFs</li> <li>• Aware of needs of buddies</li> </ul> <p><b>Buddies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need help with language for teaching Maths and Science</li> <li>• Need help with methodology</li> <li>• Lack confidence in use of English</li> <li>• Minimal use of English in classroom</li> <li>• Sought help from CFs for discrete language and grammar points</li> </ul> <p><b>Head teachers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the know about ETeMS and BSS</li> <li>• Supportive of BSS</li> <li>• Concerned with good results</li> <li>• Need to be curriculum managers and leaders</li> </ul>	<p><b>Buddies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buddies in School B are more competent as Maths and Science teachers</li> </ul> <p><b>Head teachers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Head teacher of School A more concerned with the teaching and learning of English and knows capability of teachers</li> <li>• Head teacher in School B more concerned about administration</li> </ul>

## **Discussion**

### **1. How Critical are Critical Friends?**

First and foremost, do Maths and Science teachers need language support with this switch in medium? From the interviews with buddies, there seems to be a need for language for Maths and Science processes (e.g. inferring, interpreting, hypothesizing, comparing etc) and for writing instructions and procedures in Science. I feel that the role of the CF is not only to help these teachers deal with discrete language or grammar points but more importantly to help them with language for Maths and Science processes. We must not forget that our aim is not to make English teachers out of them. This has implications for the training of CFs.

It was also found that the language proficiency of buddies were lacking in these two schools and that hampered their teaching of content in Maths and Science. These teachers used minimal English in the classroom. The need for the BSS and CFs would therefore be more critical in rural areas. This has implications for deployment and training of Maths and Science teachers in semi-rural and rural contexts.

The third issue is that of teachers teaching content through another language. I believe that it is not sufficient just equipping these teachers with the language. To be effective Maths and Science teachers, they need to be trained in content and methodology as this was found lacking among the buddies observed. Most of the teachers who were trained as CFs were English teachers and hence they could not offer help in Methodology. As noted earlier, the best CFs would be competent Maths and Science teachers proficient in English.

### **2. Choice of Critical Friend**

Both Miss Lee and Mr Wong show commitment to their roles as CFs. Although there was no great enthusiasm or excitement about it, one could feel that they were serious and committed to their tasks. They were prepared to stay back after school to help their buddies if there was a need and in the case of Mr Wong he was prepared to come back on Saturdays for staff training. Mr Wong had taken positive steps to get the system started in his school and he has used the learning contract as a platform to start off the CF-Buddy relationship. Both of them are friendly, approachable and have good rapport with their colleagues. This is crucial to their roles as critical friends as it would mean that their colleagues are willing to consult them.

Both are in their 40s and are experienced teachers although Mr Wong admitted that he was not so confident after having laid off English teaching for so long. However, their age and seniority helped them gain a better standing with their advisees (buddies). Research has shown that the provision of advice (Egan 1994) depends on a large degree on the perceived status of the advisor by the teacher and the interpersonal relationship between the 2 parties involved. The choice of CFs is made by the head teachers and heads of panels. Choosing the right person to attend the training is critical. Often choice or selection of teachers for courses are based on availability and other reasons and not the qualities that would fit the role.

### 3. Support from administrators

The CFs in both schools had the support and cooperation of their head teachers and the administrators. Both Puan Nurulyati and Tuan Haji Rosman were in the know about ETeMS and the support programmes as they had been inducted by the state education department. Pn Nurulyati knew her teachers fairly well as she was one of the Maths and Science teachers who lacked competence in the language. She even managed to “coax” me into observing the lessons of these teachers. She felt that I could provide feedback which would be of help to the teachers. Pn Nurulyati seemed to be more enthusiastic about implementing English programmes and her concern was for the improvement of English in her school. In this sense, Miss Lee seemed to get more support than Mr Wong.

School heads have to ensure that the support structure is set up in the school. They have also to monitor the progress of the various groups in the school. Both the heads informed me that they have yet to set up a system of monitoring the Buddy Support System. From the interviews with these two head teachers, I felt that their concern was more with improving results in English, Maths and Science. Puan Nurulyati voiced her concerns about the drop in the English results and for both heads, and giving extra classes to Year Six students seemed to be the solution for improving results. In dealing with such a major curricular innovation and change as this, head teachers need to take the lead and be aware of the issues and challenges faced by teachers and students in this transition period. Educationists like Fullan (1993) and Leithwood et al. (1999) dwell on school leadership and how principals can promote a shared vision for change as well as instigating and supporting the process. Often head teachers’ energies are spent on maintaining “law and order” in the school or they are too concerned with results and administrative matters that little energy is left for managing the curriculum.

### 4. Collaborative culture

Shared beliefs and values are important in terms of establishing a collaborative relationship among teachers. The BSS provides an impetus for the development of a collaborative culture in schools. It is hoped that in time to come, teachers can plan and teach together and be comfortable with the CF sitting in on their lessons. In the two schools that I visited, I could sense that teachers were just beginning to get used to the idea of seeking help.

### 5. Constraints

From discussions with Miss Lee and Mr Wong, both of them know what their roles as CFs would entail. However constraints such as heavy workload and conducting extra lessons for exam classes may leave teachers with limited time and resources to provide support that is needed. It is hoped that head teachers can perhaps lighten the work load of CFs or free them from certain duties so that they can be available for buddies. Head teachers can also provide moral support by giving CFs the recognition in staff and curriculum meetings.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has tried to study the initial implementation of the Buddy Support System in two primary schools in Melaka. I am aware that the findings of this initial study are inconclusive and I would need to make further visits to the schools concerned if I wish to get a more valid and reliable picture of the implementation. However, this initial study has given us some insights into issues that need to be addressed at the implementational level. It also provides feedback for the trainers as they review their training modules and strategies. Finally, to ensure success and sustainability of such a support system there has to be collaboration among trainers, implementers, key players in the school and Ministry officials (e.g. Inspectorate, State Education Office) involved in monitoring the system.

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