Philosophy for Adolescents : Teaching Philosophy in Malaysian High Schools

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Abstract— Is there a place for philosophy in the Malaysian high school curriculum? Those who object to this usually claim that philosophic ideas and arguments are too sophisticated and difficult for younger students. However, it has been demonstrated that younger students can learn and benefit from the study of philosophy. Witness, for example, Matthew Lipman's pioneering in the provocative area of philosophy for children, achieving eye-opening (and mind-opening) results. The aim of this paper is to examine the most compelling reasons for introducing philosophy into the secondary school curriculum in Malaysia, and to explain how this can best be accomplished with regards to the needs of students and the integrity of the discipline.

Keywords-- Curriculum; philosophy; Malaysian high school curriculum; philosophy for Malaysian adolescents

I. INTRODUCTION

THE Malaysian high school curriculum does not include Philosophy as a subject. Besides, it is not even taught at the undergraduate level in most Malaysian universities. No less an authority than Piaget has suggested that philosophy has a great deal to offer high school teachers as well as their students:

> If the principal aim of intellectual education is the training of the mind, then it follows automatically that philosophical reflection constitutes an essential objective both for those students one wishes to initiate particularly into mathematical deduction and experimental method and also for those oriented toward the humanities and the historical disciplines. (Piaget, 1971, p.55) [1]

In more standard high school courses many teachers are devoting time to the training of what has come to be called "critical thinking" in their students. Here, at least, is a clear entry point for one or two branches of philosophy into the curriculum on a more systematic basis.

What do we expect the high school adolescents to know, to do? Is there any significant gap in the present program that philosophy might fill? Is there anything that could seriously be called philosophy being taught now within the context of traditional disciplines in the Malaysian high school curriculum? Is philosophy important enough to require reducing other requirements or changing lesson plans? Given these questions, we need first to examine the areas in which

philosophy in the broadest sense might be appropriate for Malaysian high school students. Then, perhaps, we can begin to identify the skills, material, and attitudes they need for a proper understanding of what philosophy is in the traditional sense.

II. BACKGROUND

The Malaysian National Education Policy states: "Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are well responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large."[2] This is, by any standard, an absolutely noble pursuit.

In the Malaysian school curriculum, thinking skills and problem-solving skills are emphasized. Starting in the 1980, thinking skills have been infused into subjects in the Primary School Integrated Curriculum (KBSR – *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah or Primary School Integrated Curriculum*) as an added value. But this will be phased out in favour of the KSSM (*Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah or Secondary School Standard Curriculum*) in due course. [2] However, these skills are continually infused into every subject at the secondary school level to enhance pupils' thinking and problem-solving skills. School teachers are trained to employ strategies to help pupils develop their thinking skills.

The list of subjects taught at the Secondary Level include: Malay Language, English Language, Islamic Education, Moral Education, Mathematics, Science, History, Life Skills, Art and Music Education, Physical and Health Education, and other additional (optional) languages such as Chinese (Mandarin), Tamil, and Arabic. And the educational themes and aspects taught throughout the secondary curriculum include: drug prevention, family health issues, moral values, science and technology, environmental issues, parenting, road safety, consumer education, study skills, and critical and creative thinking skills, among others. [2]

III. CRITICAL THINKING

It is quite clear that "critical thinking" has been identified by high school educators as an essential element in the teaching of any subject. A number of texts and units have

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been designed to teach these skills—usually within the context of the social and physical sciences.

Traditionally, much of what falls under the heading of "critical thinking" amounts to some study of logic, linguistic analysis, and to a very limited extent, basic epistemological issues; and philosophers did contribute to the further development of texts and strategies as well as syllabi for elective courses. Certainly, anyone who has taught in secondary schools know that most students are often unable to separate good from bad arguments; nor are they learning enough about logic in the sciences to provide an adequate understanding of the most basic features of deduction and induction—including the limitations in each form of thinking. (In Malaysia, teachers who insist upon the infusion approach to critical thinking—i.e., teaching critical thinking skills through subject matter content—themselves lack adequate background in basic logic and formal reasoning capacity.)

IV. MORAL AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Another aspect closely related to rational philosophical reasoning in the Malaysian Secondary School Curriculum is the teaching of moral and religious education—especially moral education. Recent social changes and public events have led parents and educators alike to argue over the place and possible content of instruction in values and morals in the curriculum. Some are concerned that this may turn out to be too strict and authoritarian, while others are worried that it may be too lax and valueless. While individual consciousness-raising about value decisions is a component of moral education, surely the philosopher-ethicist can offer the high school curriculum a more comprehensive, acceptable program on "rational" grounds—to bridge the divide, so to speak, between the "back to basics" more traditional religious views, and the cognitive development/dilemma approach of someone like Kohlberg [3].

V. RELEVANCE

What else can philosophy contribute to the high school curriculum? What about the issue of relevance? To a certain extent, the call for relevance amounts to a demand for immediate gratification, a desire to reclassify intellectual work as 'not really work', a preference for 'with-it' material rather than any classic work—regardless of the significance of the content. Of course, this demand is legitimate because it raises the issue of the adequacy of the traditional curriculum to both engage students in meaningful ways and prepare them for the future. This is based on classic Deweyan notions that learning must begin with "where the students are" (cognitively, culturally, and emotionally) and progress through an education which unites "that which ought to be learned" with the realities of student abilities and experience.

It is not surprising that students often perceive what is taught or done in school as being irrelevant, meaningless and/or boring, whether it is important or not. Usually, the problem here is not about what is taught, but how. Sure, students are bored and restless; but is that the fault of the contents of the disciplines and classic books and ideas themselves? I don't think so. Understandably, the great works and important ideas seldom provide self-evident value

as far as students are concerned. Therefore, it is the task of teachers to provide worthwhile material and guidance for learning it, as well as to provide hints, insights, and enthusiasm so that the work appears connected and meaningful.

Students are given a vast amount of material to master in school. They are rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to openly wonder about the material within the context of their study. Such questions as "Why is this worth knowing?", "What does this assume or imply?", "How does this relate to other work in other disciplines?" mostly go unasked and unanswered—even though these questions lie at the core of the student's attempts to find meaning in and fully understand their work. Sadly, when teachers do encourage such student questions, the discussions are often haphazard and brief (and somehow understood to be "tangential"); the result is usually just "rapping", not even close to what is normally considered sustained methodical discourse. Thus, teachers must also provide students with the discipline—systematic training in the methods of focused reflection—for engaging in meaningful speculation, in order to get beyond idle chit-chat.

VI. PHILOSOPHIZING THE CURRICULUM

For the high school adolescent, philosophy should be an activity that fosters and refines his or her curiosity and perspective. Philosophers then should design lessons and materials which will help develop those skills in students, regardless of the discipline. Specifically, philosophers need to devote more attention to developing workable strategies and usable texts that will help teachers develop philosophic skills in their students—not only thinking critically, but questioning, listening, analyzing concepts, and not forgetting, wondering. If we wish to introduce students to some of what philosophy has to offer, we must use the classic ideas, texts, and problems as tools for building and improving students' philosophic skill.

School teachers must provide the proper context and environment for practice for students to learn how to speculate and criticize—how to philosophize. The biggest obstacle here is not a lack of material but an unsupportive climate for wonder. The emotional obstacles that constantly confront adolescents and hinder their intellectual growth must also be addressed: fear of looking foolish, confusing dialogue with confrontation, the insecurity about their ability to understand or ask good questions. The emphasis on quick, correct answers often imply that asking questions is a sign of failure to learn the lesson at hand—which tends to induce passivity and timidity. The priority is to develop confidence in their ability as thinkers through support and encouragement by the teacher; only then can we hope to provide students with the skills and insights of philosophy. First, help them to speculate, and only later refine and broaden their skills as critical thinkers.

There is no necessity to add new philosophy courses to the traditional secondary school curriculum. By defining philosophy as an activity of speculation and criticism, practice and knowledge in that activity can take place in the traditional curriculum. We must integrate philosophy into the traditional curriculum as a whole; then clearly it would be both appropriate and more effective for philosophers to work with

high school teachers and textbook makers to create a general philosophic "tone" to the curriculum rather than design a few isolated electives. Hence, this would suggest that philosophic questions and skills cannot be isolated, and that, ultimately, all learning is integrated. Such an integration avoids the mistake of dumping all speculative and analytical questions into one or two courses separate from the context in which they naturally originate.

Here are some examples of questions which can give the curriculum a "philosophic" flair. Is Algebra a language in the same way English is? Is discursive (analytical) language capable of expressing feelings? Where does art fit in there? Are value judgments justifiable? Is a mathematical fact the same as a historical fact? Can we really ever understand other eras or cultures or minds? Ought science and religion be examined on the same terms?

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we cannot deny that there is an important role for philosophy in the Malaysian Secondary School Curriculum. Teachers owe it to their students to treat their philosophic questions more seriously than they do currently, by providing the opportunities, skills, and material to explore them—even if they "fall behind" in their lesson plans and syllabi.

Whether we modify our curriculum to offer philosophy or electives or infuse philosophy throughout the traditional curriculum, we will help our students find their work more meaningful and interesting. I will end with Alvin Toffler's remarks on education: Since information is being generated at an ever-increasing pace, and since much of what we now know and teach will be outdated or just plain wrong in fifty years, we must provide students with the necessary thinking, research, and problem-solving skills to enable them to adapt as "mastery" of a discipline becomes impossible and work becomes more and more complex and specialized [4].

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POS Identification by L2 English Learners: A Study on Brain Activation

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Abstract—L2 learners, unlike native speakers, often have problems in efficient and seamless processing of varied facets of the L2 vocabulary. In the current study, we paid attention to how learners identify parts of speech (POS) of words in L2. With an fMRI brain imaging technique, we investigated learners' brain activation during POS type identification. Our study illuminated how brain activation varies in terms of the volume and regions according to the POS types to be identified such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, and also to learners' L2 proficiency levels.

Keywords—brain activation, fMRI, L2 vocabulary processing, parts of speech, proficiency

I. INTRODUCTION

VOCABULARY knowledge can be compositional and multi-dimensional (Nation, 2001 [1]; Qian,2002 [2] etc.). Native speakers usually process varied facets of vocabulary in a unified and automatized way. However, L2 learners, unlike L1 speakers, often have problems in such a seamless processing of the target vocabulary.

The author has conducted a series of brain imaging studies to explore how L2 English learners process varied facets of English vocabulary such as phonology (e.g., rhyme identification), semantics (e.g., antonym identification), and lexical networks (e.g., collocation identification) (Ishikawa & Ishikawa, 2008 [3]; Ishikawa & Wei, 2009 [4]; Ishikawa, 2010 [5]). Previous experiments showed that learners' brain activation could vary a lot according to the type of the lexical processing and their L2 proficiency levels.

In the current study, the focus of our research is on parts of speech (POS) as a syntactic facet of vocabulary knowledge. As mentioned in Liddicoat & Curnow (2004), the "basis of syntax is the fact that the words of a language come in different classes or parts of speech" [6]. When a learner identifies the POS type of a given set of L2 words, they need to process the syntactic information included in the vocabulary.

Concerning L2 learners' POS identification, two things need to be reconsidered. One is how POS identification differs from other types of L2 lexical processing. In an experiment by Kadota (1998), twenty one Japanese learners of English judged whether (i) two words presented are synonyms or not (semantic judgment), (ii) they are phonetically similar or not (phonological judgment), and (iii) they belong to the same POS type or not (syntactic or word categorical judgment). The

results showed that POS identification takes the longest reaction time compared with other two kinds of lexical processing [7]. This seems to suggest that a relatively higher level of processing is required in POS identification.

The other is how different types of POS, especially the four major POS of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, are processed in different ways. Syntactically, verbs function as a core of predicate argument structure and nouns function as their internal/ external arguments, while adjectives and adverbs, which are called adjuncts, cannot be arguments by themselves and are not requisite elements in the syntactic structure.

Many previous studies have mentioned the unique status of verbs in lexical perception and processing. According to Imai (2004), for instance, grasping the concept of verbs is much more difficult for children than grasping that of nouns, for the notion of action expressed by verbs is likely to be confused with that of agents expressed by nouns [8].

Recent studies have examined bran activation of people when they process L1 and L2 vocabulary. It is generally said that the regions such as the primary auditory cortex, Wernicke's area, and Broca's area are related to lexical processing. Yokoyama et al. (2006), who compare brain activations of Japanese L1 speakers when they judge nouns and verbs of active and passive forms, reveal that verbs cause greater activation in the left middle temporal gyrus, although verbs and nouns are processed in the same cortical networks [9]. According to Davies et al. (2004), who compare verb identification with noun and adjective identification, the former causes a stronger action-related association and leads to an increased activation in a posterior left middle temporal gyrus [10]. Perani et al. (1999) analyze Italian speakers and report that verb stimuli cause greater activation in the left inferior frontal gyrus than noun stimuli [11].

Meanwhile, such a POS-related difference in the volume and regions of brain activation is not clearly observed in the experiment by Tyler et al. (2001), who analyze English speakers [12]. Based on these findings, Yokoyama (2007) proposes that verbs and nouns may cause different levels of brain activation only when morphologically different as in Japanese and Italian [13].

However, as summarized in Imai (2004), findings and observations in a series of brain studies are often inconsistent. The relationship between a particular POS type and a particular type of brain activation, especially when it is processed by L2 learners has not yet been wholly clarified.

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