

## THE PRONUNCIATION COMPONENT IN ESL LESSONS: TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

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### Abstract

Research has shown that teachers' beliefs on teaching and learning exert an influence on their actual classroom practices. In the teaching of English pronunciation, teachers' beliefs play a crucial role in the choice of pronunciation components taught in the ESL classrooms. This paper explores teachers' beliefs about teaching English pronunciation in Malaysian classrooms and the extent to which these beliefs influenced the teachers' classroom instructions. Employing a multiple case study of five ESL teachers in secondary schools, this study investigated the beliefs the teachers have formed about pronunciation focused areas and classroom practices in teaching English pronunciation. Data were collected through actual classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with the teachers and students. The findings of the study found that ESL teachers seem to believe that pronunciation skills are to be taught integrally with other English language skills. Results also indicate a discrepancy between these teachers' beliefs on the focused areas of pronunciation and the stated curriculum specifications. Additionally, the ESL teachers seem to have vague and contradictory beliefs about pronunciation focused areas. These beliefs are based on their previous language learning and professional experience as well as other contextual factors such as examination demands and time constraints. As a result, these beliefs lead to the pronunciation component being neglected despite it being stipulated by the curriculum.

**Keywords:** teachers' beliefs; teaching and learning pronunciation; classroom practices.

The issue of low English proficiency among students in schools has been a major concern in the educational scene in many countries. In Malaysia, despite many years of exposure and the introduction of various types of approaches and methods of English language instructions, a large number of the students are still not able to communicate in English competently and effectively (Selvaraj, 2010; Muniandy et al., 2010). The lack of proficiency in the English Language among the students has caused a great concern for teachers and education authorities. The declining standard of English has forced the Ministry of Education in Malaysia to implement several innovative and creative education policies that could help learners immerse themselves in the English Language. In 2003, the implementation of learning Science and Mathematics in English was introduced. It was in the assumption that English could be better learnt and improved through these subjects. However, the policy invited a lot of controversial issues and was subsequently terminated in 2012. The next move is the government's plan to make English a must-pass subject at the SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia /

Malaysian Certificate of Education) examination which was initially planned to be implemented in 2016. However, this policy is recently announced postponed by the government as to allow teachers and students to prepare themselves before it could be implemented. This new policy sends out message on the importance of English and the treatment it deserves to ensure learners are better equipped to face global challenges.

### Teaching pronunciation in Malaysia

For over 20 years, researchers (Morley, 1991; Dalton, 1997; Celce Murcia et al. 2001; Wei, 2006, Gilakjani, 2012) have never ceased to agree that pronunciation is an integral part of English language teaching. However, studies (Nair, Krishnasamy, & de Mello, 2006, Jayapalan & Pillai, 2011) in Malaysia revealed the neglect over pronunciation skills in the ESL classrooms. Among the factors that lead to this negligence is the conflict between the official syllabus, the textbook, and the examination that put the English teachers in dilemma over the content to be taught.

The main focus of the English language syllabus at secondary school level is the development of the four language skills. It is stipulated in the curriculum specification that oracy (listening and speaking) and literacy (reading and writing) skills should be emphasised in the English classroom. The Malaysian English language syllabus for secondary schools states that “oral skills will enable learners to convey their thoughts and ideas clearly in speech when they pronounce words correctly and observe correct stress and intonation” (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2000). Intelligible pronunciation is crucial in communicating and to be understood as without “adequate pronunciation skills, a person’s communicative skills maybe severely hampered, and this in turn may give rise to speech that lacks intelligibility, leading to glitches in conversation and to strain on the part of the listener” (Rajadurai, 2006, p.4). Given the importance of pronunciation skills, one would assume that classroom practices would reflect what is mandated in the curriculum.

However, some studies on pronunciation in the Malaysian context (Nair, Krishnasamy, & de Mello, 2006; Rajadurai, 2006; Jayapalan and Pillai, 2011) reported that the teaching of pronunciation is not being given enough attention by teachers. A study by Pillay and North (1997) found that topics and themes were the main focus in the syllabus and textbooks. This is in contrast to the examinations in schools which focus on the four language skills as well as vocabulary and grammar. Unfortunately, the pronunciation skills in the English syllabus and the examination are sidelined. Hence, the skills that are mostly focused in the ESL classrooms tend to centre around the components that are tested in the examination. There are limited assessments that require the learners to show their abilities in pronunciation.

Another factor that causes the neglect over the teaching of pronunciation in Malaysian ESL classroom is teachers’ lack of competence in conducting lessons on pronunciation. This is reflected in the study by Gilakjani (2012) which reported that ESL teachers justified their negligence towards pronunciation with their limited knowledge of techniques to teach pronunciation. In addition, Baker (2011) points out that many teachers “seemed to take an ad hoc approach to teaching pronunciation when intelligibility was compromised”. Derwing, Munro and Wiebe (1998) argued that the method of instructions used in the classroom has a lot of influence on the success rate of learning pronunciation. Hence, there is a need for ESL teachers to equip themselves with the knowledge of the sound system and to be familiarised with variety of pedagogical techniques to teach pronunciation as well

as to be communicatively oriented in their teaching approaches and techniques (Celce-Murcia et. al, 1996). However, several studies (Rajadurai, 2001; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Wahid & Sulong, 2013) found that ESL practitioners in Malaysia demonstrate more emphasis on the teaching of the technical aspects of sound productions or phonetic symbols i.e. the segmental. As a result, pronunciation instruction loses its meaningfulness without the presence of communicative elements in the teaching methods. In addition, with examination requirements, teachers barely find the time to ensure that their lessons are communicatively oriented.

Another challenge in teaching pronunciation faced by ESL teachers is the difficulty in deciding focused area of pronunciation for their lessons. In the Malaysian textbook, pronunciation is presented both in isolation and in integration. It comes in isolation when phonemes are introduced. Undeniably, the introduction to phonemes is an appropriate starting point to teach pronunciation as it enables ESL teachers to ensure their learners’ pronunciation is intelligible. However, teaching pronunciation should go beyond just teaching the phonemes. It must also consider other areas such as accent and intelligibility and prosodic features of pronunciation (stress, intonation and rhythm) i.e. the suprasegmentals. Additionally, teachers need to identify learners’ problematic areas and address the issues accordingly.

The neglect over pronunciation skills is obviously a great contribution to the lack of competency in the English language among the learners. This is because, to achieve communicative competence, a learner has to ensure that his pronunciation does not fall below a certain threshold level (Wong, 1987; Wei, 2006). In the case of Malaysia, considering the demands of the current situations, demands from the workplace and the demographics of the country, pronunciation skills are very much needed. Pronunciation leads to good communicative skills which are essential in today’s workplaces. Clarity, problem solving skills, and negotiation skills are not only dependant on grammar and vocabulary skills as many believe. Pronunciation skills help build confidence thus, making it also a valuable skill.

The examination of teachers’ beliefs and practices is necessary in scrutinizing the factors affecting the teaching of pronunciation. This view is highlighted by Wahid and Sulong (2013) who express concern over pronunciation instruction in Malaysian context. Understanding the reasons behind the negligence of pronunciation through the investigation of teachers’ beliefs on pronunciation instructions could provide an insight on the dilemma faced by the ESL teachers. Teacher’s prior experiences that formed

their beliefs cannot be ignored and should not be separated from the study that looks into their actual classroom practices. Teachers should be aware of their beliefs so as new and appropriate beliefs about pronunciation instructions can take place.

At present, there is a noticeable gap in research on the interconnection between teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching pronunciation in Malaysian context. Thus, this study aims to explore the link between the teachers' beliefs and their implementation of pronunciation component in their English classrooms.

### **Teachers' beliefs**

In the field of education, researchers (Nespor, 1987; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Zheng, 2009; Borg 2011) agree that teachers' practices in the classroom are an expression of their beliefs. A teacher's belief is defined as psychologically held understanding, premises or propositions felt to be true and being permeable and dynamic in nature; it acts as a filter where new knowledge and experience are screened for meaning (Zheng, 2009). Previous studies by (Johnson, 1994; Pajares, 1992; Kagan, 1992) state that beliefs are understood through prior experiences, former practices and habits. Teachers develop beliefs about their teaching goals; teaching approaches, methods and techniques; classroom interaction patterns, their roles as teachers and the learners' roles based on their previous experiences.

Based on the notion that beliefs can influence one's thoughts and actions, numerous studies have been conducted to examine the link between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. The notion of teachers' beliefs has been explored in relation to teaching several skill areas, such as grammar, reading and writing. In comparison, research into teachers' beliefs about pronunciation instruction has been relatively limited.

One of the few studies which investigates the connection between teachers' beliefs and pronunciation instruction in Australia is Baker (2014). Her case study reported that ESL teachers have used the traditional controlled techniques to teach pronunciation and this result contradicts to the professed current approach with a goal to enhance communicative ability of the learners. According to Baker (2014), ESL teachers have been known to use such controlled technique which resembles the imitative-intuitive and analytic-linguistics approaches. Other studies on teachers' beliefs and pronunciation pedagogy examined the relationship between instruction and improved phonological ability (Couper, 2006; Saito, 2007) and also the link between instruction and improved intelligibility (Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1998).

As established earlier in the paper, pronunciation is an important element in the development of proficiency in a language. However, the focus given to pronunciation instruction in the ESL classroom depends largely on the knowledge and beliefs of the ESL teachers as well as other contextual factors such as the syllabus, examination orientation and access to materials. Thus, in order to investigate the interconnections between teachers' beliefs with their classroom practices, a framework which can illustrate this relationship is needed.

The link between teachers' beliefs and practices can be understood in light of Borg's (2003) framework of teacher cognition. This framework posits that classroom practices are influenced by the interaction between teachers' beliefs and several dimensions such as schooling, professional training and contextual factors. Borg (2003) argues that teachers' beliefs are developed during their schooling years and professional training they received. These learning experiences or training would have an influence on their classroom practices. In addition, contextual factors such as syllabus requirement, examination and learners' needs could also have an impact on their teaching.

Hence, by using this framework, we could examine the link between teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices in the classroom. Since little is known about the connection between teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching pronunciation, this aspect of teachers' cognition in language teaching deserves further attention.

### **The context of the study**

This paper is a part of a larger qualitative multiple case study which looks into the ESL teachers' beliefs and their practices about pronunciation instructions in the classroom. The focus on this article is on the beliefs of the focused areas or content in pronunciation and how these areas are taught or incorporated in the ESL classrooms. A number of previous studies on teacher's beliefs about pronunciation instructions have employed a quantitative approach (Wong, 1987, Sifakis & Sougari, 2005, and Rajadurai, 2001) and did not include observations of teachers' actual classroom practices. Borg (2006) argues that studies on teachers' beliefs should include observations of teachers' actual classroom practices. Apart from Baker's (2014) study, this research also includes observations of teachers' actual classroom practices and not merely teachers' self-reports of their practices.

This study examines the beliefs of five selected ESL teachers who teach at secondary schools in the state of Selangor. The selection of the teachers for this study was based on two criteria: their academic

qualifications and the number of years of teaching experience in the secondary schools. With the diverse background of the participants, this study has considered the beliefs and experiences of both novice and expert ESL teachers. Several studies (Borg, 2006; Allen, 2002; & Richards et al., 1992) have encouraged these two factors to be considered for participant selection as they might have a strong influence on the ESL teachers' beliefs and practices. Five participants were deemed sufficient for this study as the focus of a qualitative case study is on the breadth and depth of the area studied. In conducting a qualitative case

study, a small sample is encouraged because the purpose of the study is on investigating a detailed understanding of the teachers' beliefs that lead to their course of action in the classroom. In addition, the complicated nature of beliefs, the observations of actual classroom practices as well as the demanding data collection and in depth data analysis require the researchers to use a small number of participants for the study. Based on the justification on the selection of participants for the study, the teachers were categorised as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' particulars

Name	Age	Years of teaching experience	Education (Teacher training)	Education (Non teacher training)	Position in school
Anita	30	6	KPLI	B.Sc I T M.Ed TESL	English teacher
Laily	45	22	Dip. Ed.	B.A Linguistics M.A Linguistics	English teacher & data teacher
Suzana	34	9	B.Ed. TESL	Nil	English teacher
Mary	27	3	Nil	B.A Business Admin	Untrained temporary teacher
Linda	39	16	KPLI	B.A Mass Comm	English teacher

Note: \*KPLI – In Service / Graduate's Teacher Training Course (A one year teacher training course usually conducted by the local universities or teacher training colleges). \*Pseudonyms are used

## METHOD

The data collection for this study took two forms: actual classroom observations which documented the pedagogical behaviour in the ESL classrooms and semi-structured interview to solicit information with regard teachers' beliefs. The use of these two methods would provide a different perspective on the data collected. Through the interviews, participants were asked to share their schooling and professional experiences in relation to teaching and learning of pronunciation. The participants were also asked on contextual factors that may influence their beliefs and classroom practices. To enhance the findings obtained from the interview, we also conducted classroom observations in order to investigate the connection between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices.

This study was conducted in a natural context of instruction where the researcher was the key instrument. This reflects the key feature of a qualitative study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Lincoln and Guba (1985) used the term "naturalistic inquiry" to express the authenticity of the whole environment without manipulation. Table 2 summarises the data collection. This table includes the data collection methods, description or nature of the methods, the questions or guide used and the data administration. This summary applies to all five participants. However, the duration spent for data collection for

each participant varies between 2 to 4 months depending on the participants' class schedule and availability for the interview sessions. The selection of lessons was also a contributing factor in the duration for data collection as only lessons that had elements of pronunciation were observed. This was based on the negotiation between the researchers and the participants.

For the purpose of triangulation and validity of the interviews and observations of the participants, the researchers also conducted semi-structured interviews on the students to gain their insights of the teaching and learning expectations as well as to uncover their experience of learning pronunciation in the classroom.

Qualitative data collection and analysis is a simultaneous and iterative process (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Hence, data were consolidated, reduced and interpreted to reveal important themes that underlie the participants' beliefs on the topic understudy and the themes across other different participants were compared. The raw data were first transcribed verbatim and then analysed. The texts were read several times and the first impressions from the text were noted down. The coding of the interview transcripts was based on various dimensions derived from Borg's (2003) teacher cognition framework such as schooling, professional training and contextual factors. The data were sorted and rearranged in the matrix tables for the purpose of making a general

sense of the data. The initial codes were then re-examined to detect any overlaps and redundancies. Then a Microsoft Excel spread sheet was used where the initial codes, episodes and sources from the interviews and classroom observations were typed,

and then categorized or collapsed and sorted in alphabetical order. The themes that emerged from the categories and their explanations were then developed into mind maps. The mind maps became the basis for the development of a summary for each participant.

Table 2. Organisation and nature of data collection

Data collection methods	Description of method	Questions/guide	Data administration
<i>Audio-recorded Interviews: ESL Teachers</i>	<b><u>Two Phase Interview</u></b> <i>Phase 1</i> Interview sessions (Beliefs and teacher's background prior to observation)	Questions to counter check the practices of pronunciation in the classroom.	<i>Participant 1</i> 1 month
	<i>Phase 2</i> Interview sessions after observations (to confirm researcher's interpretations).		<i>Participant 2</i> 2 months  <i>Participant 3, 4 &amp; 5</i> 4 months
<i>Audio-recorded Interviews: Students</i>	<b><u>One session interview</u></b> <i>Number of students</i> Minimum of two students taught by participants.	Questions to counter check the practices of pronunciation in the classroom.	<i>Students of Participant 1, 2, 3, 4 &amp; 5</i> (after teacher interviews and observations)
	<i>Selection of students</i> Selected by the participants.		
	<i>Number of interviews</i> Once.		
<i>Video-recorded Observations</i>	<b><u>Video Recorded Observations</u></b> Selected lessons.	<b><u>Classroom Observation Checklist</u></b> Contains the contents, activities of pronunciation and stages of a lesson.	<i>Participant 1</i> 3 months
	<b><u>Number of Recorded Observations</u></b> Participant1: 5 lessons Participant2: 3 lessons Participant3: 4 lessons Participant4: 3 lessons Participant5: 3 lessons		<i>Participant 2</i> 2 months  <i>Participant 3, 4 &amp; 5</i> 4 months

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Success in communication

The findings revealed no specific beliefs on the emphasis on any area of pronunciation. The participants did not reveal a belief on any specific aspects of pronunciation be it the segmental or suprasegmental (prosodic) features of pronunciation. The participants believe that the pronunciation topics are embedded in the skills that promote communication with the aim of achieving overall success in communication. This belief could be influenced by the way they were taught pronunciation during their own schooling days. One of the participants, Anita had recalled her schooling years, and revealed that her exposure to pronunciation lessons was minimal. She had difficulty in recalling any of the incidents related to the teaching of pronunciation in the classroom. However, Anita recalled that it was incorporated in the speaking and

reading lessons and that there was no technical exposure to the symbols of sounds and stress of pronunciation.

(Extract 1)

*We never really had any separate lessons. We were not taught any technical terms or separate lessons. It just came within speaking and reading.*

(Anita)

It was admitted that one of the reasons for the lack of emphasis given on any area of pronunciation was the lack of emphasis on the teaching and learning of pronunciation during her own schooling years.

(Extract 2)

*One of the reasons, because since young, it was not emphasized at all. We were not exposed. Pronunciation is not tested anyway. Only oral and oral is a separate certificate.*

(Anita)

Pronunciation was only seen as a shadow of other language skills during their school years. Instead of directly admitting to the negligence of the pronunciation skill, it was assumed that pronunciation was to be embedded in other language skills especially in the speaking and reading activities. Most of the scenarios described have justified the minimal attention given towards pronunciation skills in their English language lessons.

Additionally, some of the participants' professional trainings were not very supportive in terms of promoting the importance of pronunciation and providing sufficient input in terms of the theoretical and pedagogical aspects of pronunciation. Some had only undergone a short teacher training course to get a place as a teacher in the school. There was also no emphasis on the methodology of teaching pronunciation. The focus of the short teacher training program was mainly on teaching grammar and other language skills.

*(Extract 3)*

*Definitely nothing of such pronunciation course. In the teacher training course, they did not cover much on it. It was just grammar and reading. I think I might have received a worksheet or notes on pronunciation. That's about it. I think the pronunciations symbols were there in that particular worksheet or notes. But then, there were no follow up activities. So we didn't regard it as so important because it wasn't an assignment.*

*(Anita)*

The participants' beliefs of pronunciation learning during their schooling years and professional training have been negatively formed. The preconceptions that they have developed from their schooling years through their professional experience have remained unchanged. The belief that pronunciation is not important is now brought to their classroom practices.

Another common belief amongst the participants is the concern on other language contents and skills for examination purposes. This is a clear evidence that pronunciation is sidelined. The participants indicated that the teaching of the four main skills and other language items such as vocabulary and grammar are compulsory.

*(Extract 4)*

*Of course the other four skills were given a lot of importance compared to teaching and learning pronunciation. Even during my class time and also even in the school. It is only covered in the school textbooks. But whenever we have meetings or discussions in terms of curriculum, nobody gives emphasis; nobody emphasizes on pronunciation. We always look at grammar drills. We look at*

*comprehension, summary; exactly whatever that covers for exams. And communication skills, just because of the oral. So usually nothing much on pronunciation. It's all individual. It depends on the teachers. If we have extra time; if we have good students then we can just go on with it.*

*(Anita)*

Pronunciation, on the other hand, is seen as just a small and insignificant component. It was clearly implied that the core components, mainly listening, speaking, reading and writing made up an English lesson. If pronunciation is taught, it is usually taught in an integrated manner through the speaking or reading skills to prepare students for the oral examination. It is collectively agreed among the participants that the language skills and items focused are the tested ones. Pronunciation is almost never mentioned in the English Language meetings and discussions. The neglect over pronunciation is also seen amongst their colleagues where they have never discussed about pronunciation in their discussions. In their teaching, they believe in avoiding technical explanations as far as possible so as not to go too deep into the phonetics analysis in which the students may not be able to comprehend. This then leads to the belief that pronunciation component is best integrated into the teaching of the other language skills. It is not the norm to have pronunciation as the main focus of their English Language lessons and definitely never taught as a separate lesson. Laily said in the interview;

*(Extract 5)*

*We just browse through the books, the dictionaries and things like that. So we don't really know like we don't really have a proper lesson plan. We don't know how to come out with a proper lesson plan. If, I mean, in relation to pronunciation, It'll be very tough for us. So, we just go along as we teach to make sure they pronounce it correctly. We make them listen and things like that. We don't really teach them the technical, we don't bring them so deep inside.*

*(Laily)*

The explicit dealing of pronunciation component is seen as inappropriate to be taught to the learners. Laily believes that her learners are either incapable of understanding the depths of pronunciation or overburdened with the many components of the ESL lessons thus unable to cope with too many aspects of the language.

One of the participants, Suzana had admitted that pronunciation was never taught directly in her English lessons. In fact pronunciation was almost absent from her lessons. This was confirmed during the interviews with her students. They confirmed that pronunciation was only highlighted as and when the students made

mistakes in pronunciation.

(Extract 6)

*Interviewer: How often does your teacher teach pronunciation in class? Does she always teach grammar, reading, and writing only?*

*Interviewee: Pronunciation, no. When she asks us to discuss and present, if we make mistakes in pronunciation, she will point it out.*

(Suzana)

### Obsession on forms and examinations

Most of the participants believe that pronunciation is a skill that cannot and should not be taught directly. Their main focus of skills is mainly on grammar and other skills which are tested in the examination. To them, the main goal of teaching and learning English is to be understood. They believe that pronunciation is just a small component and plays a small role in conveying one's intended meaning and in improving the students' grasp of the English Language.

(Extract 7)

*What is important in our country is the message that gets across. And people here, we speak to Indians, Chinese and Malays, right. They are not native speakers. They can understand if you use gestures. You don't even have to articulate. So, as far as I'm concerned in this country, teaching pronunciation is not that important to improve their English. What is important would be grammar.*

(Laily)

Improving oneself in the grammatical aspect is more crucial according to the Laily, who is educated in the U.K. Not only is grammar tested in every component of the English Language whether directly or indirectly, it is also used to decide on the level of proficiency of the students.

(Extract 8)

*I think pronunciation should be made known but it shouldn't be the focus because the focus is the grammar. We want them to speak with the correct grammar. Imagine someone speaking in English but with wrong grammar. It's a shame, isn't it? They have to speak to other people outside the school.*

(Laily)

Examination has always been a priority for the teachers as well as the students. Hence, the teaching focus in the classroom has to always take into consideration the examination requirements to ensure students achieve the expected results. All of the participants have placed examination as the focus of their teaching. This was specifically admitted by the senior teachers like Laily and Linda who had the experience of being the examiners of the standardized English Language examinations in Malaysia.

According to them, at the end of the day, the examination results are the benchmark in measuring the teachers' success in teaching as well as the students' academic achievements.

(Extract 9)

*We focus on the examination format. We want them to be creative in essay writing because I've been an examiner.*

(Linda)

Laily, who has experience living and working in an English native speaking country personally believes that pronunciation is important for English teachers. She believes that learning pronunciation requires an individual to have the interest and motivation to improve one's pronunciation.

(Extract 10)

*One must have that, you know, I don't know what's the word but it's like, it's already in me. Ever since I was young, I want to speak like them (the native speakers) because otherwise it doesn't feel good. It is not proper English when you speak, for the sake of speaking English. How many people would think the same way as I do?*

(Laily)

Despite her wide exposure to native speakers' accent and the opportunity to teach the native speakers, she feels that accommodating to the needs of the learners is more important. This is evident when she regarded pronunciation as important when she taught the native speakers. However, when she began to teach the English Language in Malaysia, her goal of teaching changed into making sure that the learners do well in the examinations. With examinations in focus, pronunciation is excluded from her lessons.

### Focus on grammar and writing

Suzana and Mary who received different types of teacher training commented that they spent most of the times teaching both grammar and writing. They felt accountable for the students' success in the examination. After all, examination is the only indicator of a students' success. The focus of the English Language examination has been set where essay writing is allocated 50% out of the overall marks and comprehension with 40%. Only 10% is allocated for the oral assessment where pronunciation is not assessed as a separate skill. Although pronunciation and intonation are parts of the construct for the criteria of the school-based oral assessment, the assessment was carried out by considering the students' comprehension ability through a reading text. The students are only expected to achieve basic oral skills and the assessment should be of help to the students in adding good or high marks to the other assessments.

(Extract 11)

*In reality the teacher has to really follow the syllabus and the majority mostly focus on essay. Essay carries 50 marks and then comprehension that we cover in paper 1, 40 marks and another 10% for oral test. So let's say if they want to have like 25% in oral I don't think it will be a problem. The problem is, whether they have enough time to finish the syllabus or not. Whether we have enough time to really focus on those four skills. Listening and speaking, essay writing, comprehension and as well as grammar in a year.*

(Suzana)

Time constraint is another factor that made the participants focus more on the teaching of the tested skills. The other participants added that there were a lot of topics and skills that needed to be taught. However, the time allocated for English lessons did not permit them to teach or focus on pronunciation although they expressed their willingness to teach pronunciation if they had the luxury of time. The limitation of time had forced them to focus only on the important skills. Hence, this has made them become exam-oriented teachers.

(Extract 12)

*We have to finish fast, we have exam week, we have other things coming on, in the next month, so frankly, I don't really plan to teach or I don't really teach listening and speaking with my students. I only focus on reading comprehension which is covered in Paper 1 exam. Then I have to teach grammar since it will be useful for them because they need to write correct sentences in their essay and I also have to teach literature and essay since it will come out in the exam so it's really exam oriented.*

(Mary)

This has placed the participants focus on pronunciation far below the other language skills. However, they do not totally disregard pronunciation as most of the participants are in agreement to the importance of pronunciation in order to succeed in communication. Pronunciation has its importance and helps build confidence in the students' speech as well as portray good image of the students. However, due to the examination and syllabus requirements they had to succumb to the requirements.

(Extract 13)

*Yes,... of course because I think it does not play a big role. I think only one of the important roles. O.k, because when they mispronounce the words, it might mean something else right, so if they get it wrong and then they mean something else then they will feel shy, so it leaves an impact to the students and they may also misunderstand the meaning of the words. O.k,*

*then it will develop their confidence in speaking English.*

(Mary)

Mary's choice of content focus was based on the emphasis of the examination. She has made passing examinations as her priority in the selection of skills to be focused although she strongly feels that pronunciation has a place in the learning of the English language.

#### **Catering to the learners' needs**

Some of the participants of this study are in the opinion that pronunciation skills are essential for low proficiency students. It is a skill that helps build good foundation of the language. However, given the fact that pronunciation is given less emphasis in the examination, the teaching focus had to be mostly on grammar. Like most language teachers, the participants believe that grammar is the foundation in learning the English Language.

(Extract 14)

*Teachers nowadays have to race against the time, we have to do this and that. So, for me, teaching remove I don't do that. For me, I must make sure they understand. That is why I of course, I stress on pronunciation at the same time they must understand the meaning, then only they can use the word.*

(Linda)

In this excerpt, Linda expressed concern in the needs of the students. Teachers nowadays grapple with high expectations from various stakeholders. Hence, she feels that it is the responsibility of the teachers to be vigilant to their students' needs. Although some of the participants had agreed on the importance of pronunciation as part of a skill to learning a language, many still lack the content and pedagogical knowledge of pronunciation. Hence, this has limited their teaching focus to only on grammar and pronunciation. If pronunciation was focused, it was merely on the basic sound systems of vowels and consonants.

Mary, a young teacher has made a comparison between her schooling experiences as a learner to her teaching experience. She felt that sufficient and quality input was provided during her schooling years. Her teachers' approach seemed to suit her idea of the appropriate way to guide a student in learning. An ideal approach which she has experienced in her schooling years is currently used in her teaching approach. She believes a solid foundation of the language needs to be provided to the learners to enable them to progress to a higher level.

(Extract 15)

*Almost every day I had English lesson when I was in Form 1. I couldn't remember my primary years because I was moving around, too many schools I shifted. Why I can remember form 1 because I stayed in one place for two years. And then 3 years, I was here, this school. So, I can remember more on my secondary school. Almost every day I'll have English, almost everyday. What year was that? 1998. Form 1. Almost every day the teacher guided us, how to write a poem. How to start. What are the things that you can think of when you write a poem. She actually practically taught us, how to come up with ideas.*

(Mary)

The belief stated by Mary indicates clearly that it is the teacher's duty to improve classroom practices. The participants believe that the focus chosen in the ESL lessons should facilitate students' learning. Every

teacher should be held accountable for their students' learning. Hence, teaching strategies should be structured to meet the needs of the students.

### What happens to pronunciation in the ESL lessons?

Their beliefs about the focused areas of pronunciation are then compared to their actual classroom practices. Table 3 shows the content focus in the lessons observed in the English Language classes of the five participants. It is important to note that none of the lessons observed were exclusive lessons on pronunciation. The participants strongly believe that pronunciation should not be taught in isolation. However, the focus on the areas described in Table 3 was only highlighted in passing and not dealt adequately to improve pronunciation skills.

Table 3. Focused areas in the teaching of pronunciation

	Anita	Laily	Suzana	Mary	Linda
Sound discrimination (vowels and consonants)	√	√	√	√	√
Consonant clusters in different combinations	√			√	
Past tense and plural forms	√		√	√	√
Sentence stress and intonation			√		√
Homonyms – homographs, homophones	√				

Based on Table 3, it can be concluded that segmental features appeared as the focus of pronunciation teaching. The sound discrimination of vowels and consonants were observed as mostly taught by the participants. The selections of sounds taught, however, depended on the focus of the lesson and selection of materials. If the lessons focused on grammar and vocabulary, then it depended on the grammar and vocabulary items taught for the lesson for the participants to determine the content focus for pronunciation. In the selection of materials, based on poems, tongue twisters, dialogues and stories, the participants had analyzed the sounds that could be highlighted during the pronunciation focus in the lessons. This means that pronunciation was not made the central focus in the lessons. Indirectly this suggests that the pronunciation content outlined in the Malaysian school syllabuses were not referred by the participants in their choice of content. This gives an indication of how pronunciation is being sidelined and only dealt with when there is a need to focus on pronunciation.

Based on the analysis in Table 3, suprasegmental features were the least focused. If the aim of the participants was to teach the learners to be communicatively competent, then the pronunciation aspect of it is also sidelined. It indicates the lack of understanding of the role that suprasegmental features

play in achieving competency in the language. Word and sentence level stress were not even taught by any of the participants and intonation was only dealt indirectly through reading aloud. In one of the participants' lessons where a poem recitation method was used, intonation was stressed indirectly in the group presentation. In fact, intonation was indirectly highlighted in all of the participants' lessons through reading aloud of different materials.

Homonyms were only dealt with by a participant who used tongue twisters as part of a summary lesson. However the homonyms were not the main focus of the lesson. The focus was on writing a summary based on repetitive words, sentences and meaning found in the tongue twisters.

These analyses of focused areas in pronunciation teaching have shown how pronunciation is generally treated. Firstly, in all the lessons observed from the 5 participants, none of the participants have conducted any explicit teaching on pronunciation. Secondly, the selection of content was not based on the requirements of the content stated in the syllabus. It was based on the main skills or materials used for the lessons. Finally, the lack of theoretical knowledge of pronunciation and limited understanding on the goal of teaching pronunciation has made most of the content areas in pronunciation neglected by the participants.

## CONCLUSION

One important point emerging from this study is that teachers' teaching beliefs are shaped by their own learning experiences, professional, and social factors. Teachers alter their methods based on their beliefs of what and how English should be taught regardless of what is professed in the English Language curriculum. In this study, the participants were found to have taught the pronunciation component using the traditional methods despite the fact that the English Language syllabus promotes a more communicative approach. The study also indicates that the participants did not focus on any specific area of pronunciation in the ESL classrooms. Although some participants claimed that they focused on the suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation, the classroom observations and interviews with the learners did not provide evidence in support of such belief. In other words, teachers did not teach according to what is mandated in the syllabus. Rather, they tried to meet demands such as examination needs of their learners. Most of the participants showed concern on other language areas and skills for examination purposes. The classroom observations revealed that pronunciation skills are very much neglected. As Baker and Murphy (2011) points out that teachers tend to use methods that they considered optimal for enabling students to succeed in examinations. Littlewood (2007) highlighted some of the challenges faced by East Asian classrooms include the external conflict with the educational policy that hinders the implementation of more communicative approaches. ESL teachers could conveniently leave pronunciation out of their ESL lessons, as it does not affect the examination performance of the students. Thus, a mismatch of the desired approach in teaching pronunciation and the positioning of the skill in the English Language curriculum are evident.

Although some studies (Nair, Krishnasamy, & de Mello, 2006; and Fraser, 2002) have indicated that ESL teachers created false reasons in avoiding to teach pronunciation, the negligence towards pronunciation must be taken into consideration. The researchers view the reasons behind this neglect as challenges that the ESL teachers need to overcome in their ESL classrooms. If this issue is not addressed, pronunciation will continue to receive the back seat treatment. Celce Murcia et al. (2006) argued that when ESL teachers neglect the pronunciation skills in their ESL lessons, they have failed in carrying out their duties as ESL teachers. As commented by Levis (2005), the stress on the importance of pronunciation has always been determined by the ESL teachers' own intuition and ideology rather than research. As what we have argued earlier, this study has proven that the participants have limited knowledge on the

pedagogical aspects of pronunciation. As a result, the activities and tasks that they use in teaching pronunciation are mostly based on what they believe the focus on pronunciation should be and their limited knowledge about pronunciation content and instructions. In turn, the amount of emphasis that pronunciation deserves is trivialized.

This study has provided descriptions of the selected ESL teachers' beliefs about pronunciation focused areas and evidence of actual pronunciation practices. It serves as a platform on reflections of the ESL pronunciation practices in schools as well as the professional training. These findings could be used to serve as an input to teachers' professional development program. By identifying the sources of teachers' beliefs and practices, we could facilitate the deconstruction of personal theories through conscious process of discussion, reflection and theoretical exploration (Fajardo, 2013).

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