

TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES IN TEACHING ENGLISH AT MALAYSIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Recent trends in Malaysian's educational policy have focused on meeting the challenges of globalization and internationalization. As English has achieved the status of a major international language, the government of Malaysia has been actively expanding the teaching of English as an essential part of the school curriculum. The issue of how to improve the standard of English proficiency among young learners has been one of the most discussed in Malaysia. Learning English, as envisaged in the ELT curriculum, should be fun and pupil-centred.

As part of an effort to examine the state of ELT in Malaysian primary schools, this study looked at the instructional strategies employed by English language teachers in their classrooms. A survey was conducted in six states in Malaysia which represent the northern region, east and west coast of the peninsula and East Malaysia. The sample comprised of 215 English teachers teaching at primary level. The findings of this study revealed that English language teaching practices employed by primary school teachers in Malaysia were in line with the English curriculum stipulated by the Ministry of Education. Data indicated that teachers employed teaching strategies which are learner-centred, interactive, develop oracy and literacy skills. Furthermore, the results also indicated that the teachers' instructional practices are closely related to their teaching experience.

Keywords: English language teaching, classroom practices, Malaysian primary education.

1 INTRODUCTION

English language teaching (ELT) policy in the Malaysian context is well documented. The Malaysian primary school English language curriculum document stated that "English is taught as a second language in all government assisted schools in the country..." (Ministry of Education, 1995, p.1). English is important in the country's quest for economic development as the global nature of the world has now made it the language médium for business, technology and knowledge. The issue of how to improve the standard of English proficiency among young learners has been one of the most discussed in Malaysia. At the primary school level, Malaysian ELT syllabus aims to equip pupils with basic English language skills so as to enable them to communicate, both orally and in writing, in and out of school. According to the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education (2003), by the end of the primary school education: i) learners should be able to listen to and understand simple spoken English in certain given contexts; ii) ask and answer questions, speak and express themselves clearly to others using simple language and in acceptable level of English; iii) acquire good reading habits to understand, enjoy and extract information from a variety of simple texts; iv) write legibly and express ideas in simple language and in an acceptable level of grammar. Learning English according to the Malaysian primary school curriculum should ensure that pupils would acquire linguistic knowledge and skills through learner centred and activity-oriented teaching-learning strategies.

Given that establishing basic English language skills in the primary classrooms is the main goal in the curriculum, it is important that teachers conduct their lessons to facilitate the development of these skills. As such, the classroom is the most critical context in looking at the effectiveness of any education policy implementation. Investigating the classroom practices of English language teachers at the primary school level could reveal the most fundamental impact of ESL curriculum policy. However, there has been relatively little attention given to ELT at the primary level. Research on ELT in Malaysia tend to focus on secondary and tertiary levels of education. Thus, in order to develop more effective English language teaching instructions for learners at primary school level, teachers' current classroom practices need to be examined.

This paper is an attempt to examine issues regarding ELT in Malaysian primary schools, with a particular focus on the classroom practices. This study aims to examine these questions: 1) What instructional strategies are reported by primary school teachers in teaching English to young learners?

2) Does teaching experience influence the primary school teachers' reported classroom practices? Findings from this study could be used to inform policy makers and teacher trainers on how teachers are likely to implement a curriculum in their classroom practices and how to provide appropriate teacher education programs.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study aims to explore the teaching practices among English language teachers in primary school. It was carried out using a survey method. In the questionnaire, items were designed to probe the primary school teachers instructional practices in teaching English to primary pupils. The questionnaire is divided into two parts, namely Part A containing questions related to biodata information and Part B containing items related to teaching strategies practiced in the English classrooms. In the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to assess their ELT practices to primary school pupils on a four-point Likert scale, by indicating the frequency of using the stated strategies (1) = Not at all (2) = Somewhat (3) = Moderately, (4) = A lot. The internal consistency reliability was calculated for the respondents' response to the questionnaire. A Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.78 was obtained, which indicated the respondents responded to the items with a relatively high level of consistency.

Convenience sampling was used to select respondents based on the availability of the teachers. Respondents of the study consisted of 215 English teachers who taught in primary schools in various states in Malaysia. The participants of the survey consisted of 42 male teachers and 173 female teachers. Of these teachers, 36.3% (n=78) obtained Diploma in Education, followed by 31.2% (n=67) qualified with SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education), 17.7% (n=38) qualified with STPM (Malaysian Higher Certificate of Education) and only 14.9% (n=32) were qualified with Bachelor's degree.

The age range was 26 to 46 years old. Moreover, 38.1% (n=82) of the respondents had more than 20 years teaching experience. This was followed by 19.1% of the respondents with 16 to 20 years of experience and those with 5 to 10 years (15.8%), 11 to 15 years (13%), 1 to 5 years (13%) and 0.9% with less than 1 year experience.

3 RESULTS

The results reported in this section are based on data obtained from the Likert-style items questionnaire. On a scale from 1 to 4 (1=Not at all and 4= A lot) the most frequent teaching strategies which the respondents reported to be carried out in the ELT classrooms in Malaysian primary schools were calculated. Descriptive statistics were used to illustrate the results obtained.

Table 1: Teaching strategies focused on facilitating pupils' comprehension

Item	Mean	Std dev	Frequency (%)			
			1	2	3	4
Speak clearly.	3.70	0.48	0	0.9	27.4	71.6
Slow down and simplifies language when appropriate.	3.67	0.51	0	1.9	29.3	68.8
Rephrase and repeat messages in a variety of ways	3.53	0.56	0	3.3	40.9	55.8
Use both Malay and English & translating during classroom talk	3.42	0.57	0	4.2	49.3	46.5
Use body language, visuals & realia to communicate meaning.	3.42	0.55	0	2.8	52.6	44.7
Use sentence drilling activities to practice grammar rules	3.41	0.60	0	5.6	47.9	46.5

Note: 1 =Not at all 2 =Somewhat 3 = Moderately 4 =A lot

Table 1 showed the mean and frequency of teaching strategies which are focused on facilitating pupils' comprehension employed by the Malaysian primary school teachers. Analysis of the data showed that instructional strategies most often used by the respondents were those that focused on pupils' understanding. 99% (m=3.70) of the respondents reported that they frequently spoke clearly, 98.1% (m = 3.67) slowed down and simplified their language, and 96.7% (m = 3.53) repeated messages in a variety of ways, and 97.3% (3.42) used body language, visuals and realia to communicate meaning. It is interesting to note that 95.8% (m = 3.42) of the respondents reported that they used both Malay and English & translating during classroom talk and 94.4 % (3.41) of them used sentence drilling activities to practice grammar rules. These findings correspond with Mohd Sofi's (2003) study which reported that the use of Malay and pattern drillings are common practices among English language teachers in primary schools.

Apart from these two practices, general findings tend to show that the respondents focused on instructional practices which are in line with the guidelines released by the Ministry of Education (1995) with regards to the new primary school curriculum which suggested that teachers need to employ teaching strategies which facilitate students' understanding.

Table 2 : Strategies based on group work and oracy skills

Item	Mean	Std dev	Frequency (%)			
			1	2	3	4
Instruction includes the active participation of students.	3.39	0.51	0	0.9	59.1	40.0
Make use of a wide variety of activities where students can work at a level that is appropriate for them.	3.21	0.54	0	6.0	66.5	27.4
Use cooperative group learning	3.18	0.60	0	10.7	60.5	28.8
Make use of a variety of grouping techniques such as pair work, small groups, etc.	3.14	0.59	0	11.2	63.3	25.6
Carry out communicative activities such as role plays, simulations and presentations, to promote speaking skills.	2.97	0.70	0.9	14.9	70.2	14.6
Carry out listening activities in the classroom	2.74	0.73	0.5	35.8	52.6	11.2

Note: 1 =Not at all 2 =Somewhat 3 = Moderately 4 =A lot

Table 2 displays the results on the implementation of teaching strategies which are based on group work and oracy skills. From this table, we could see that ELT teachers in primary schools employed instructional practices which involved learners' active participation and group work. However, in terms of carrying out oral communication and communication activities, the results indicated that only 84.8 % (m=2.97) respondents taught speaking skills and 63.8 % (2.74) taught listening skills in the English classrooms at the primary schools. These findings are not surprising as Mohd Sofi (2003) points out that listening and speaking skills had been neglected in primary schools since these skills were not tested in the examinations.

Table 3 : Teaching strategies to develop literacy skills

Item	Mean	Std dev	Frequency %			
			1	2	3	4
Teaching and learning activities are focused on helping students to achieve the learning outcomes stated in national curriculum syllabus.	3.61	0.51	0	0.9	37.2	61.9
Use a variety of teaching strategies and learning activities to help students learn.	3.46	0.52	0	0.6	52.6	46.5
Solicit and draw upon prior knowledge and experiences with new themes	3.27	0.55	0	5.1	62.3	32.6
Select and adapt instructional material for learners' developmental level	3.20	0.62	0.5	9.8	59.5	30.2
Use a variety of reading activities to make language and content more accessible, e.g. mind mapping etc.	3.19	0.63	0	10.7	61.9	27.4
Use a variety of writing activities to develop pupils writing skills	3.17	0.65	0	10.2	60.9	28.8

Note: 1 = *Not at all* 2 = *Somewhat* 3 = *Moderately* 4 = *A lot*

Findings from Table 3 shows that 99.1% (m = 3.61) of the respondents conducted teaching and learning activities that focused on helping students to achieve the learning outcomes stated in the primary school syllabus. Among the teaching aspects which are based on the level of development of pupils are as follows: 99.1 % (m= 3.46) employed a variety of teaching strategies and learning activities to help pupils learn, 94.9 % (m= 3.27) solicited and drew upon prior knowledge and experiences with new themes and 89.7 % (m= 3.20) selected and adapted instructional materials for their learners' developmental level. Eventhough the English curriculum emphasizes on the development of literacy skills, only 89.3 % (m=3.19) of the primary school teachers used a variety of reading activities to make language and content more accessible and 89.7 % (m=3.17) of the teachers carried out a variety of writing activities to develop pupils writing skills.

Table 4 : Relationship between teaching strategies focusing on pupils' comprehension and teachers' experience

Items	Teachers experience			Significance
	1-5 years	6-15 years	16- 25 years	
Speak clearly				
Rarely	100% (2)	0	0	$\chi^2=15.974$ *
Sometimes	20.3 % (12)	27.1% (16)	52.5% (31)	
Very frequently	10.4% (16)	29.9% (46)	59.7% (92)	
Slow down and simplifies language when appropriate				
Rarely	75%(3)	0	25%(1)	$\chi^2=22.040$ *
Sometimes	23.8% (15)	23.8% (15)	52.4%(33)	
Very frequently	8.1 % (12)	31.8%(47)	60.1%(89)	
Use both Malay and English & translating during classroom talk				
Rarely	55.6%(5)	11.1%(1)	33.3% (3)	$\chi^2=18.060$ *
Sometimes	17.0 % (18)	29.2%(31)	53.8%(57)	
Very frequently	7.0% (7)	30% (30)	63%(63)	
Use body language, visuals & realia to communicate meaning.				
Rarely	83.3%(5)	0%(0)	16.7%(1)	$\chi^2=28.865$ *
Sometimes	15%(17)	31(35)	54%(61)	
Very frequently	8.3%(8)	28.1%(27)	63.5%(61)	
Use sentence drilling activities to practice grammar rules				
Rarely	58.3%(7)	16.7%(2)	25.0%(3)	$\chi^2=33.951$ *
Sometimes	17.5% (18)	31.1%(32)	51.5%(53)	
Very frequently	5% (5)	28% (28)	67% (67)	

* level of significance at $p < 0.05$.

A chi-square frequency analysis was carried out in order to examine the relationship between teachers' experience with their ELT practices in primary schools. Results in table 4 showed the relationship between teaching strategies that focus on students' understanding and teachers' experience. Findings of this study showed a significant relationship between the teachers' teaching experience and instructional practices i.e speak clearly to facilitate learners' comprehension, slow down and simplifies language when appropriate, use both Malay and English & translating during

classroom talk, using body language, visuals and realia and use sentence drilling activities to practice grammar rules. The relationship between the teachers' experience with these teaching strategies are significant at the level $p < 0.05$. These findings may imply that the more experienced the teachers, the more they would employ instructional strategies that facilitate their pupils comprehension.

Table 5: Relationship between teaching strategies to develop literacy skills with teachers' experience

Item	Teachers' experience			Significance
	1-5 yrs	6-15 yrs	16- 25 yrs	
Solicit and draw upon prior knowledge and experiences with new themes.				
Rarely	27.3%(3)	18.2%(2)	54.5%(6)	$\chi^2=8.240$
Sometimes	17.2%(23)	30.6%(41)	52.2%(70)	
Very frequently	5.7%(4)	27.1%(19)	67.1%(47)	
Select and adapt instructional material for learners' developmental level.				
Rarely	19%(4)	38.1%(8)	42.9%(9)	$\chi^2=14.037$ *
Sometimes	17.2%(22)	25.8%(33)	57%(73)	
Very frequently	4.6%(3)	32.3%(21)	63.1%(41)	
Use a variety of reading activities to make language and content more accessible, e.g. mind mapping etc.				
Rarely	34.8%(8)	17.4%(4)	47.8%(11)	$\chi^2=15.830$ *
Sometimes	15%(20)	26.3%(35)	58.6%(78)	
Very frequently	3.4%(2)	39.0%(23)	57.6%(34)	
Use a variety of writing activities to develop pupils writing skills				
Rarely	22.9% (8)	25.7%(9)	51.4%(18)	$\chi^2=7.197$
Sometimes	14.6%(20)	27.7%(38)	57.7%(79)	
Very frequently	4.9%(2)	36.6%(15)	58.5%(24)	

* Significance level at $p < 0.05$.

Table 5 displays the chi-square analysis of the relationship between teachers' experience with their instructional strategies to develop literacy skills. Findings of this study indicated that there is no significant relationship between the primary school English teachers' experience with instructional practices such as solicit and draw upon prior knowledge and experiences with new themes and using a variety of writing activities to develop pupils' writing skills.

However, results in Table 5 revealed that teachers' experience and their teaching strategies such as adapting instructional materials according to the level of pupils' cognitive development i.e, using a

variety of reading activities to make language and content more accesible and adapting instruction to pupils' ability attained a significant relationship at $p < 0.05$.

Table 6: Relationship between group work and development of oracy skills with teachers' experience

Item	Teachers' experience			Significance
	1-5 years	6-15 years	16- 25 years	
Instruction includes the active participation of students.				$\chi^2=14.301$
Rarely	50%(1)	0	50%(1)	*
Sometimes	19.7%(25)	30.7%(39)	49.6%(63)	
Very frequently	4.7%(4)	26.7%(23)	68.6%(59)	
Make use of a wide variety of activities through learning centers where students can work at a level that is appropriate for them.				$\chi^2=21.793$
Rarely	40%(10)	20%(5)	40%(10)	*
Sometimes	12%(17)	31.7%(45)	56.3%(80)	
Very frequently	4.3%(2)	26.1%(12)	69.6%(32)	
Use cooperative group learning				
Rarely	21.7%(5)	21.7%(5)	56.5%(13)	$\chi^2=6.776$
Sometimes	16.9%(22)	27.7%(36)	55.4%(72)	
Very frequently	4.8%(3)	33.9%(21)	61.3%(38)	
Make use of a variety of grouping techniques such as pair work, small groups, etc.				$\chi^2=11.248$
Rarely	29.2%(7)	25%(6)	45.8%(11)	*
Sometimes	15.4%(21)	25.7%(35)	58.8%(80)	
Very frequently	3.6%(2)	38.2%(21)	58.2%(32)	
Carry out communicative activities such as role plays, simulations and presentations,				

to promote speaking skills.

Rarely	29.6%(16)	29.6%(16)	40.7%(22)	$\chi^2=16.284$
Sometimes	8.5%(11)	29.2%(38)	62.3%(81)	*
Very frequently	9.7%(3)	25.8%(8)	64.5%(20)	

Carry out listening activities in the classroom

Rarely	21.7%(5)	21.7%(5)	56.5%(13)	$\chi^2=6.336$
Sometimes	17.1% (21)	27.6%(34)	55.3%(68)	
Very frequently	5.8%(4)	33.3%(23)	60.9%(42)	

* Significance level at $p < 0.05$.

With regard to the relationship between teachers' experience with instructional practices related to group work and development of oracy skills, results from Table 6 indicated that classroom practices which include pupils' active participation, using a wide variety of activities through learning centers where students can work at a level that is appropriate for them, using a variety of grouping techniques, carrying out communicative activities and carrying out listening activities in the classroom were significant at $p < 0.05$ level. As a whole, these findings seemed to indicate that the English language teachers' classroom practices are linked to the Ministry of Education guidelines specified for the primary school English curriculum.

4 CONCLUSION

This study aims to gain insights into current instructional strategies used by English teachers in Malaysian primary schools to help their pupils to acquire English language skills. Teachers are seen as important agents of knowledge, thus attention should be given to ensure that they employ effective teaching practices. Waxman and Tellez (2002) argued that effective instructional practices are fundamental in improving the quality of English language teaching.

The findings of this study revealed that the instructional practices employed by the primary school teachers in Malaysia were in line with the English syllabus stipulated by the Ministry of Education (1995) which suggested that teachers need to employ teaching strategies which develop pupils' oracy and literacy skills, learner-centred and interactive. Teachers are seen as the facilitator of learning and they need to adopt a more activity-oriented instructional practices. The results of this study seemed encouraging in the support they reflect for the implementation of the Malaysian primary school English curriculum.

The study also seek to identify the relationship between teachers' experience and English language teaching practices in the primary schools. Research in language classrooms indicates that teachers' experience and pedagogical knowledge generally influence their instructional practices (Freeman, 1989; Richards & Nunan, 1990; Johnson, 1992). The findings of this study seemed to indicate that the English language teachers in Malaysian primary schools' instructional practices were influenced by their teaching experience.

Research findings from this study highlight the need to provide teacher development opportunities for primary school teachers. Opportunity for primary school teachers to receive further training at universities should be increased so as to enhance their skills in implementing the essential components specified by the curriculum in their teaching practices. In conclusion, efforts must be

continued to ensure that there is no gap between the actual implementation of the curriculum in the English language classroom with teachers' experience.

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