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Upskilling English Teachers in Malaysia: A Critical Pedagogy Perspective

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ABSTRACT

English language teachers play an integral role in shaping Malaysian citizens. Recently, the Ministry of Education introduced the upskilling of English teachers nationwide as it was found that of 70000 teachers, 70% were found to be unfit to teach the subject, based on the English Language Cambridge Placement Test. Selected English teachers are now required to attend courses to ‘upskill’ and hone their language proficiency and pedagogical skills. Selected English teachers attend a training programme run by the British Council to upgrade their linguistic and pedagogical competencies. Drawing on the concept of critical pedagogy and language teaching and learning, this paper examines how teachers involved in the Ministry of Education upskilling programme reposition and manage their identities as teachers and learners as well as how they view the programme in their lives as teachers. Fifteen teachers undergoing the upskilling training were interviewed using structured interviews. It was found that although most of the participants highly valued the programme, almost all felt that it was burdensome in terms of adding to their workload and some could not see how it would help them in their classrooms. It is important to analyse sociocultural perspectives of such programmes in order for us to understand the complexities that are involved in the development and training of teachers.

Keywords: English Language Development, Critical Pedagogy, Language Teacher Education, Malaysia

Introduction

Several policies and strategies have been introduced by the Ministry of Education of Malaysia to improve the standard of English language education. There was a change in the medium of instruction policy in 1983 that saw all national schools convert to the Malay language from English. In 2003, there was a major policy change where English was introduced as the medium of instruction in the teaching of Science and Mathematics in all schools in Malaysia. However, in 2012 this policy was reversed once again and the teaching of Mathematics and Science was once again changed to the national language of Malaysia, the Malay language. In 2013, there was a major shift in the Malaysian education policy with the introduction of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025. The MEB outlines the strategies and shifts to foster an inclusive and equitable development of education as the basis for higher growth of the country. Two important policy initiatives in the MEB to improve practices related to the standard of the English language are the English Language Teacher Development Programme (SISC) and the Professional Up-Skilling of English Language Teachers (ProELT) (Ministry of Education, 2012).

This exploratory study draws on the critical pedagogy perspective (Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pavlenko, 2002) to examine how teachers undergoing the ProELT

programme view the value of programme to enhance their social capital both as users and teachers of the language; and how they construct their identities as learners and teachers of English. It is important to encourage teachers to reflect upon and examine their assumptions regarding their own language learning experiences and language teaching perspectives. It is also imperative to analyse the sociocultural perspectives of such teacher development programmes in order for policy makers and stakeholders to understand the complexities that are involved in the development of teachers. It is hoped that this study will provide insights into how these teachers view their role as English teachers and their desire to improve themselves in terms of their investment as language learners and how construct their identities as learners and teachers of English when they undergo the teacher development programme.

Related Literature

The Pro-ELT Programme in Malaysia

The Ministry of Education of Malaysia in partnership with the British Council introduced the Professional Up-Skilling of English Language Teachers (ProELT) in 2013. The general aim of programme is to enhance the language proficiency as well as the pedagogic competence of English teachers (English Language Teaching Centre, 2013). In terms of measurement, teachers are tested at the beginning as well as at the end of the ProELT programme so that improvement in terms of language proficiency can be tracked. In Malaysia, the Aptis test developed and administered by the British Council is used to measure the language proficiency of English teachers. The Aptis test also acts as a filter to ensure only teachers who require the course attend it. In 2013, British Council successfully completed a one year pilot project of the ProELT with 5000 Malaysian English Language Teachers. Phase two of the project started in January 2014 to train 9000 Malaysian primary and secondary school English teachers. According to the British Council, the aim of the programme is “to strengthen English language teaching and learning through a blended training approach including quality face to face delivery, supported distance learning and integrated proficiency and methodology training” (English Language Teaching Centre, 2013). Thus teachers attending the programme are given training to develop their language proficiency as well as pedagogic competence in teaching English.

Critical Pedagogy, Identity and Investment: A Teacher’s Perspective

Practices and beliefs in language teaching and learning need to be examined critically in order to understand the relationships between language learning and social change. Norton and Toohey (2004, p.1) state that “language is not simply a means of expression or communication; rather, it is a practice that constructs, and is constructed by, the ways language learners understand themselves, their social surroundings, their histories, and their possibilities for the future”. Thus, examining beliefs and feelings of teachers involved in the ProELT programme will enable us to understand how these teachers negotiate their identities as professionals and as learners. The critical pedagogy approach also allows us to understand situation where practices might be modified and changed to support learners, the learning context, and social change (Pavlenko, 2004).

The concept of investment and identity by Norton (2000) which describes investment as relating to a person’s commitment to learning is also adopted in this study. Traditionally in second language acquisition circles this would be constructed as a learner’s instrumental motivation to learn a language, i.e. what value would learning the language be to the learner (see Crookes and Schmidt, 1991; Dornyei, 1994, 1997, Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995). Norton Peirce (1995) and Norton

(2000) argued that investment is related to the social context the learner is in and assume that a learner has a complex social identity which changes across time and space and envisage learners and users of a language as having multiple desires unlike the more traditional perspective that sees motivation as advocating a static identity and learners and users as having a single desire for learning a language (see Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995). Looking at language learning in terms of investment and identity allows us to further understand and unravel the complexities that are involved in learning a second language. This may be helpful in terms of planning for future second language courses as well understanding the learners themselves. Learners are individuals with their own identities and their own desires, there a myriad of complexities involved in learning a language. In the case of the ProELT programme, it is a complex situation as the learners are teachers themselves who are still teaching at the moment they are undergoing the programme. Most of them may have preconceived notions that they have performed below par on the Aptis test and thus this may impact on their identities as language learners and teachers. Applying, the critical pedagogy approach as well as the investment and identity approach to language learning, it is hoped that a better understanding of how teachers undergoing the ProELT programme construct and negotiate their identities as teachers and learners of the language and how they view the programme in their lives.

Methodology

This study involves structured interviews with fifteen teachers who were selected based on the criterion that they had completed the ProELT programme or at the time of the study were enrolled in it. Thirteen participants were females and two were males. All of them had been teaching English for more than 3 years. All of them were selected to participate in the study based on their willingness to participate in the study. Appropriate to a qualitative study, three main questions were designed to invite responses from the participants. Based on Norton and Toohey (2004), Norton Peirce (1995), Norton's (2000) and Pavlenko (2002, 2004), this study revolves around the following main questions:

- i. How do teachers of English view the upskilling programme in general?
- ii. What identity positions have been helpful and useful to teachers of English in the upskilling programme?
- iii. What is the investment of teachers of English in the upskilling program?

From these three main questions, an interview protocol with 18 questions was designed. The interview questions were then emailed to 55 participants who were attending the ProELT programme. Of these 55 participants, only 15 responded and completed the interview questions. The medium of email was used as opposed to face to face interviews, as it was believed that the participants could respond at leisure, and they could think about their responses and change their responses if they deemed it necessary. As critical pedagogy requires a certain amount of reflection on practices and beliefs of the participants, it was assumed that it would be more appropriate to allow participants to reflect and think about the questions and their responses rather than requiring them to complete the interview immediately. When the interview questions were emailed to the participants, the researcher merely wrote that the participants should email the responses as soon as possible. The average response time was about 5 to 8 days. 40 of the participants did not respond at all, citing as being too busy to complete the questions when contacted by the researcher. This is one limitation of this method, as opposed to conducting face to face interviews, as the participants could opt not to participate. Another limitation was that some of the answers were trite and not explained in detail. However, there were some participants who made the effort to respond with as much information as they felt was sufficient.

Findings and Discussion

General Feelings about the ProELT Programme

Overall, it was found that most of the participants felt positive and happy to be chosen to attend the programme. Thirteen of the participants responded positively to this question. In response to the question of how they felt about having to attend the course some of their answers were:

Participant F: I feel excited because I have the chance to improve my English language and meet other English teachers from the same district.

Participant G: I think it is fortunate to get the chance to attend this course as its aim is to strengthen English teaching and learning through a blended approach.

However, two participants were somewhat negative. Their responses were:

Participant A: Beneficial but at the same time bored and tired because of the course duration and workloads (homework and online exercises).

Participant B: When I was first selected into the course, I was disappointed, frustrated and heart-broken. But then as time goes by, I can accept and enjoyed the course as well.

In general, all of them had positive remarks, although some were apprehensive of attending the programme at the beginning.

The participants were also asked to state the objective of the ProELT programme and also to evaluate the success of the programme in terms of achieving its objectives. All the participants knew the objectives of the ProELT programme and felt that the objectives had been achieved. Participant G provides a critical analysis of the suitability of the Aptis test and how the programme was carried out. The answers to both these questions are given side by side for us to look at how participants evaluate its effectiveness and objective.

Participant E: To strengthen English teaching and learning in Primary and Secondary Schools across Malaysia.

Participant E: Yes, both learning and teaching.

Participant G: To improve English teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching English.

Participant G: To be frank not really (meets the objective). We do learn many things from the course but I have to say the course is also exam-oriented. The final objective is to ensure that we can achieve C1/C2 in the Aptis test. The speaking activities are all Aptis oriented. It would be better if less priority is given to how to pass the Aptis test (C1/C2) but to upgrade the knowledge and skills of teaching among English teachers in Malaysia.

There was one question that drew mostly negative responses. Participants were asked if the ProELT course had met their expectations. All of them replied that their expectations had not been met. The question before that asked the participants what were their expectations of the course before they attended it. Some of the responses for both questions are shown below:

Participant A: I thought and I really hope the British Council will help the teachers by giving the methods or skills of teaching especially techniques that can be used in remedial classes.

Participant A: No. It is not about skills, techniques or method for how to teach the remedial students at all. It was more to upgrading the teachers' proficiency.

Participant N: I hope I can speak and write better in English as well as understand grammar rules.

Participant N: Not really. Most of the speaking and writing activities that we do are more to making/helping us achieve C1/C2 in the Aptis test.

There seems to be a mismatch between teachers' expectations of the ProELT and what they experienced. Teachers probably needed a more detailed explanation of the aims of the ProELT programme so as to dispel their concerns and dissatisfactions. The aims and objectives of the programme should also match the activities and the testing so as to ensure that the programme meets its general aim which is to upskill or develop teachers' language proficiency as well as pedagogical skills.

Constructing identities vis-a-vis the ProELT programme

Several questions explored the personal changes the participants might have experienced while undergoing the ProELT programme. This would in a way allow us to examine how the participants viewed their professional identities as teachers and linguistic identities as learners. Attending the ProELT programme placed these teachers in a unique situation as they had to navigate between their roles as a teacher and a learner at the same time. The participants, being teachers, who are undergoing re-training would also become learners. In terms of identity construction, questions explored how the teachers constructed their social identities vis-à-vis the ProELT programme, and their multiple roles as learners and teachers of English. Participants' personal identity consisted of their goals, values, and beliefs as language learners and as teachers. In this context, social identity was taken to mean how the participants viewed their roles and relationships with their ProELT facilitator(s) and their classmates. Some of the responses are discussed below.

In terms of how the participants viewed their identity as a teacher being affected by the ProELT course, the responses included:

Participant M: As an English teacher, the ProELT course has helped me in developing my classroom methodology and understand my students better.

Participant O: It has helped me to see that I can teach English in a more interesting and creative manner.

In terms of how the participants viewed their identity as a language user/learner of English being affected by the ProELT course, the responses included:

Participant E: I need to learn and improve a lot especially in writing.

Participant H: The course teaches me on the correct use of the language. It helps me to assess my ability in all four English skills.

In terms of the how the participants viewed their social relationship with their ProELT facilitator, the questions required them to describe the teaching style of the facilitator, describe if the facilitator was a native-speaker of English and the relationship they shared with the facilitator. The responses to describe the teaching style of the facilitator included:

Participant B: My facilitator used most of dictator style. He focused on the teacher-centered by giving all the input.

Participant G: Our facilitators are qualified teacher trainers. They are versatile in conducting various activities during the course.

Participant H: No, she is not a native speaker, but she has a good command of English especially grammar. In my opinion, the facilitator should not only be limited to native-speakers of English.

Participant J: Yes. He is a native speaker.

Responses to describe the relationship the participants shared with their facilitators included:

Participant F: We are like friends. It is definitely different from my past experiences in my undergraduate classes. We are not scared of making mistakes even

though sometimes the mistakes are silly. I like to talk to her even though sometimes I can't really understand her. She treats us like friends, not students or learners.

Participant K: We have a good relationship, as my facilitator is willing to help me along the course.

In terms of the how the participants viewed their social relationship with their fellow classmates in the ProELT course, the questions required them to describe their classmates, and the relationship they shared with their classmates. The responses included:

Participant B: I love all of them! They are attentive, they are helpful, they are caring and most off all them are loving.

Participant F: We are like a big family and very close to each other.

Participant G: My classmates are very supportive and we can cooperate with each other well and all of them have positive attitudes.

Participants were also asked how they felt when their classmates and/or facilitator(s) corrected them during their ProELT classes. The responses were once again positive, overall. Some of the responses include:

Participant D: Happy and not disappointed at all. I am the youngest students in the class with the least years of teaching experience. My classmate and facilitator are much older than I am. When I make mistake, they never look down but they are supportive. They always give me the in depth explanation when I did something wrong.

Participant F: I feel nothing and sometimes I am happy when my mistake is corrected. It is a process of learning together and the more mistakes being corrected means the more I can learn.

Most the responses indicate that the participants feel that the ProELT classes will help them become better teachers and in the long term help them help their students. They seem to take on their roles as being learners seriously and positively. This is a refreshing insight given the many complaints that are heard from teachers who attend the programme as to the increased workload and the expectations piled on them. The participants seem to be constructing various identities during the ProELT classes and there does not seem to be power struggle in terms of being taught by native speakers of English. The participants in this study seem to be invested in upskilling themselves and take on the roles of being learners positively, yet maintaining the identities as teachers. They seem to be conscious that the programme will in the end make them better teachers.

Investment and the ProELT Programme

Investment relates to one's commitment to learning, as opposed to the more traditional view that looks at issues related to motivation in language learning in terms of instrumental and integrative motivation (Norton, 2000). Investment in language learning is related to the social context and assumes a complex social identity which changes across time and space and envisages learners and users of a language as having multiple desires unlike traditional views on motivation advocating a static identity and learners and users as having a single desire for learning a language (see Crookes and Schmidt, 1991; Dornyei, 1994, 1997, Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Norton, 2000). Participants were asked if it was important for them to improve their English proficiency, the necessity of attending the course and whether the course will be beneficial for them in the future. Some of their responses included:

Participant E: Yes, I need to improve my English proficiency because sometimes I feel inferior when I'm among the English teachers.

Participant G: Yes, I have to admit that there are many things that I do not know. If I do not improve my proficiency, I will fail to be called a teacher because my students may be better than me.

Participant H: I think it is necessary for all English teachers to equip themselves with adequate knowledge of the language and this programme is one way of doing this.

Participant N: I think all along the course, I gain not only knowledge and friendship, but most important thing is the confidence to speak and to use the language.

The participants seem to view the ProELT programme as being beneficial to them, not only in terms of enhancing their skills but adding to their identities as teachers who are competent. However, there seems very little mention as to how the course relates or helps them with their pedagogical skills. They seemed to identify themselves as learners or users of English more so than teachers of English when discussing the benefits that they will gain. The aim of the programme is to actually help them with enhance their ability in the language as well as pedagogical skills, but here the participants seem to be more focused on enhancing the language skills. Probably the focus of the classroom practices needs to also be investigated to examine and analyse what is transpiring in the classroom and if the teaching is aligned with the programme aims.

Conclusion

This small scale study shows that generally teachers view the ProELT course as being beneficial to them as teachers, although some were hesitant initially to attend the programme. Using the critical pedagogy perspective where teachers reflect on their own practices and beliefs allows us to look at the issue at a micro level, in terms of how teachers internalize and make sense of their experiences when immersed in the ProELT programme. The participants were also able to relate their experiences as being both learners as well as teachers. The participants seem to have developed positive social identities as learners and are invested in the learning of English for the future of their students. As succinctly put by one of the participants when asked whether it was necessary for her to attend the programme again the future, her response was:

Participant D: Yes. At least once every two years. We will know our language level if we attending this course. It is like renewing our teaching skills, methods and techniques. Besides, we will have the opportunity to get to know experience teachers and facilitator.

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