

English Language Teaching Challenges in Malaysia: Polytechnic Lecturers' Experience

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Abstract: Reflective Practice (RP) is a means to explore one's teaching dimensions. Thus, by exploring two selected participants' teaching practice, this study was set out to investigate the challenges faced by the English lecturers, who served in polytechnics' setting. A case study inquiry strategy, via reflective journal writing and semi-structured informal interview, was employed in getting the insight of lecturers' reflective language teaching practice. A Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) programme, Atlas.ti 7, was used in managing the data. Document analysis was inductively run to identify the emerging themes from the entries and transcripts. Results show that issues related to students appeared to be the main challenge to the lecturers. Also, non-academic tasks, concerns related to professionalism and classroom and policy or institutional requirements have been identified as other challenges in their teaching practice. Some practical recommendations are offered based on the current scenario in Malaysian polytechnics' setting.

Key words: TVET higher learning institution • Reflective practice • ELT • Case study • Teaching challenges

INTRODUCTION

Teaching alone is a challenging task, so teaching other languages welcomes more interrelated features of the task [1]. Exploration into teaching is an alternative that needs to be considered by teachers in order to be informed about their practices. In teaching, teachers who are better informed as to the nature of their teaching are able to evaluate aspects of their teaching they need to change [2], identify their beliefs [3] and help them shaping their personal pedagogical knowledge [4] based on the collected information of interrelated features from their exploration. These are some common elements that influence their teaching practice. In language teaching, awareness is required so that teachers become constantly alerted with their professional surrounding that evolves from students' learning needs to policy requirements, e.g. [5-8]. This tendency also transcends across the levels of education learning institutions due to the dynamic features in teaching and learning process of other languages. An example of established exploration in language teaching is through reflective language teaching practice. It basically involves critical evaluation towards self-performance with the intention of improvising the

teaching acts based on immediate professional needs [3], [9] and [10]. Also, due to the bottom-up orientation concept of reflection [10], the outcomes of the practice can help to provide the language teachers with the immediate access to the manner in which an individual's knowledge of practice has developed [11]. This includes the indications of external factors such as constraints, concerns and challenges that contribute to some direct and indirect impacts [12] to their teaching and learning process regardless of their students' level of proficiency and status. The evaluation can be carried out through reflective practice procedures for instance reflective journal, colleague collaboration, peer observation and action research [10].

Thus, based on the aforementioned theoretical foundation, this particular study, as a small part of an on-going postgraduate research, is meant to explore English lecturers' reflective practice in order to identify underlying challenges that are related to English Language Teaching (ELT) in polytechnic's context - as one of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) higher learning institutions in Malaysia. Given the recent highlighted issues on technical graduates' poor of English command, the results of this

study are expected to share the real challenges experienced by the polytechnic English lecturers in teaching the target skill to the future nation human capital in which it differs from previous studies that mostly revealed the findings and concerns from students' perspectives [5], [6], [13-15]. Some practical recommendations based on the present situational requirement are included.

Background to the Study: Polytechnic is one of the hubs for the nation's human capital development [16]. In present transformative phase, its role has been expended and its establishment has been re-branded in making sure the nation missions are accomplished by providing the human capital source to the industrial sectors in order to generate the economic growth [17]. Thus, the orientation on teaching and learning processes in this TVET higher learning institution is mostly focused on the skill-based subjects (such as technical, commercial, services and, information and communication technology courses) that have been improvised and improved in order to be in line with the national plan in achieving Vision 2020. Given the highlighted studies and reports on unemployment issue among technical graduates [13], [14], [18], poor command of English has been identified as the main issue that triggers the researchers to keep on investigating various aspects of English teaching within tertiary education scope, e.g. [6], [7], [12], [13], [19-21]. Though the topic has been repeatedly being studied, the outcomes were given from students' perspective and learning per say and little information has been shared about ELT in technical higher institutions particularly from lecturers' or teachings' perspective [12]. The real challenge in producing proficient graduates is unspokenly shouldered by the English lecturers. Thus, to understand what they do and grasp what they have faced call for an open exploration to their practice in identifying the challenges that they actually experience, then the outcomes could be linked to the poor English command issue so the chain of the overall picture in ELT could be established. No finger pointing intention is expected to be discovered, instead the search for the practical recommendation to all responsible parties is required to solve, or overcome, the unresolved issue.

Nature of English Course and English Lecturers in Polytechnic's Context: For a start to the above-mentioned intention, the initial step is to understand the nature of polytechnic lecturers' practice. Firstly, English is a compulsory subject to all polytechnic students except for

those who are undergoing their industrial attachments. Even English is not classified as a main subject content being offered, it is a requirement for the students to pass their English course. The ELT in this particular TVET higher education institution is based on on-going assessment mode. The grading is determined by students' accumulative mark, in their spoken and written assignments, quizzes and listening tasks for the whole semester and then combines with their final standardized test. If the students fail to perform any of the assigned tasks, they are given chances to improve their marks in any ways that suit the syllabi and the lecturers' availability before they are allowed to sit for their final standardized test. Unwritten rule, lecturers must make sure they pass by all means. Besides that, students' attendance is taken into consideration in determining their status whether they are qualified to be evaluated by the lecturers or not based on the compliance of the institutional academic procedure. The continuous monitoring process on the attendance is also considered as part of lecturers' task. These situations indirectly describe the scenario of language lecturers' job scope, whereby juggling between core tasks – teaching – and clerical works. This practice can be considered as a threat to the lecturers' professionalism because unreasonable teaching tasks hinder teachers to prepare for quality teaching and undertake professional development programmes due to wider job scope with limited time allocation [8], [12].

Next, in current inter-transformation phase, language lecturers have two different sets of English syllabus to be used as their guide in instructional teaching preparations. The groups of students who enrolled before July 2010 learn English in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context whereas the later intakes are taught in Communicative English (CE) setting. To start off, though each group of students relies on a similar syllabus that has been used across the fields (i.e. engineering, commerce, information and technology and hotel and tourism), the module preparation is conducted in a manner to closely accommodate the authenticity consideration of students' background. These circumstances indirectly urge the language lecturers to be aware of the trans-disciplinary subject contents of different fields so that they can practically integrate the specific corpora and jargons used in the notes, examples and tasks as contents of the module [21]. So, the awareness of the lecturers in this term promotes the 'discourse community' to the students in preparing them for the communicative demands in their future workplace [19]. In other words, the

language lecturers' tacit knowledge should address the surface ideas of their students' fields of study so they can interchangeably teach any language topics in different jargons to different courses of students [19, 21].

In addition, the English syllabi orientation has been changed from English as Specific Purposes (ESP) into Communicative English (CE) due to the recent polytechnic transformative revamp action plans. The emphasis on the speaking skill has been given the specific focus on language teaching in polytechnics. It is designed to provide students with useful expressions that can be used in a wide variety of social interactions and situations [19]. As a result, the calls for communicative language tasks in the lesson plans are inevitable to promote the interaction in the target language. Still, some concerns related to class size [10], students' level of proficiency [5], [14], [15], facility [7], [8] and personal pedagogical knowledge supports [4], [19] are considered as they are 'forcing' the lecturers in 'do more with less resources' position. That is why the debates on the reasons why English language proficiency level of the technical students is low have been going for several years [7]. It develops a never-ending-issue chain. The real symptom has never been clearly addressed and acknowledged in allowing the cotangent measures can be taken into consideration. Hence, the explorations into lecturers' reflective practice provide the potential understanding on the significance of the different dimensions that contribute to tertiary teaching and to encourage them to talk about their teaching [9]. As a result, the shared thoughts can be manipulated into solution to the students' issue.

Last but not least, language lecturers in polytechnic must comply with the institutional requirements. As for the credit hours, an English module should be taught to the students within 15 weeks of instructional duration per semester. The lecturers have to teach a minimum of 16 hours per week. This is accumulated from the three hours of teaching per class. A common class size in polytechnic is between 35 to 45 students per class, depending on the latest intake of the semester. So, it means a lecturer must teach and deal with 280 to 320 students of 8 different classes who are from different courses per week. The weighing of lecturers' work demand can be easily listed if the students sit for their quiz or submit their individual task in that particular week. Other than that, they must attend a minimum of 10 days courses per year and involve in newly cultivated culture, i.e. research, with none basic research background. In addition to that, attending impromptu meetings, assessing students' activities, performing in community services and collaborating with

industries are some other lists to the polytechnic lecturers' 'job inventory' [8]. All in all, it is a worth effort to explore on the real challenges in the English teaching practice of polytechnic lecturers in order to dictate on the visible factor that influences the outcomes of the language teaching and learning in which may be linked to the poor English command among technical students.

Objectives of the Study: Basically, this study was purposely driven in order to explore the lecturers' reflective practice in order to identify information that being shared in which related to the challenges in ELT. So, the expected results would be meant to sorely address the following research question:

- What challenges do polytechnic English lecturers face in their teaching practice?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Study: This study was a small part of an on-going postgraduate research involving polytechnic lecturers as research participants. A fully qualitative case study approach was employed in order to inductively investigate the challenges of ELT in TVET higher learning institutions. Purposive sampling method was chosen in order to select the research participants. The implementation of this type of sampling method was also influenced by the access and willingness concerns [22]. The access to the research site was formally and easily gained due to the familiarity factor and the warm rapport established between researcher and participants has increased the flow of the data collection procedure. Hence, two English lecturers were selected from the population.

Data Collection: Interview transcription and reflective journal entry were the primary data sources in this study. First and foremost, consent was asked from the participants by giving them a consent form. Then, semi-structured informal interviews were individually conducted to each participant in order to gain overall overview of the participants' teaching practices in their institution. An interview protocol was developed to guide the session. Their responses were audio-taped and then transcribed verbatim. Simultaneously, each participant was asked to keep reflective journal so they could share daily recollections of their activity, thought, feeling, aspiration or expectation which were related to their teaching practices. There was no specific instruction

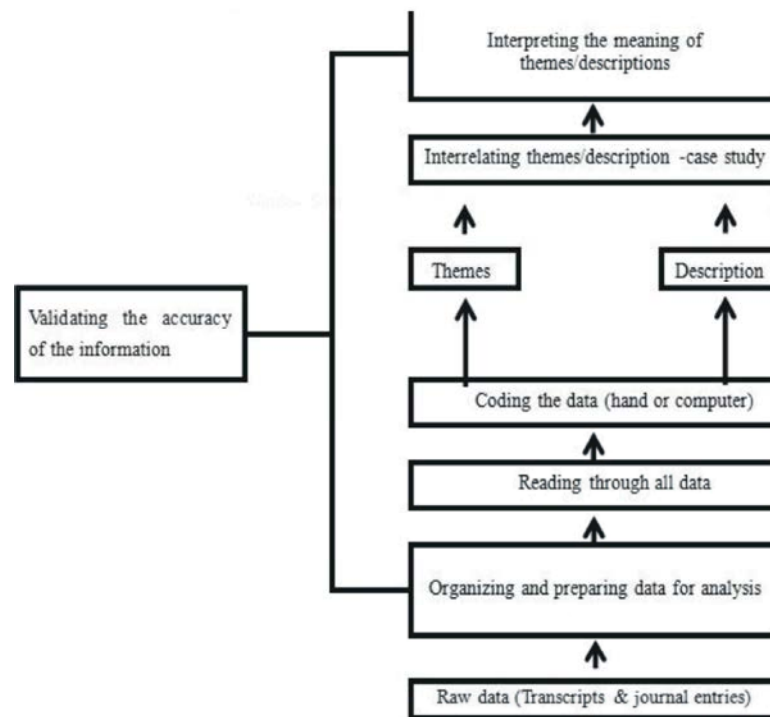


Fig. 1: Basic data analysis in qualitative research [25]

imposed to the participants as the researcher intended to let the written entries as natural responses as possible. This is because writing diary enables to permit one to freely express what they feel by using their own preferences in term of words and phrase [23]. With that in mind, it was expected that the responses given would specifically depict the ELT practice in this particular population setting. After 9 weeks, researcher put a stop to the task once there were no further developments of displayed topics or any new potential aspects of participants' practices would be identified. This was because the participants had actually reached the 'saturation' point [24] in which similar tunes of entries could be identified in their writing. A gentle reminder was constantly given to make sure the participants kept on writing their entries. Written responses from the entries were used in counter-checking the consistency of the verbal information from the interviews.

Data Analysis: All obtained data were organized in Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software, Atlas.ti version 7. Then, the process of reading, re-reading and coding were carried out through the same software. The steps of the analysis is mostly similar to the basic qualitative analysis (Figure 1) by [25] which is normally conducted in manual pencil-and-paper mode. With this tool, the data from both sources, interview transcripts and

reflective journal entries, could be easily linked through the 'code manager' accurately without having flipping any more papers from back to forth. The highlighted excerpts were assigned with related themes that emerged. The summary of these produced an audit trail which could be edited from time to time analysis before a finalized networking was created.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results: Based on the inductive analysis on both cases from both data sources, there are several frequent responses given by the participants that shared similar features which could be interpreted as the emerging themes of the topic discussed; i.e. sources of challenges to the participants' language teaching practice in polytechnic's context. The following table (Table 1) depicted the summarized derived concerns as the specific examples of the challenges. The identified emerging themes were mostly related to the issues and concerns of students, classroom, policy, workload, time and institution. The table consists of 5 major features that challenged participants in their teaching routines.

Discussion 1: Clearly, the issues that related to students are identified as the major challenge to the participants. It appears that participants did not only deal with common

Table 1: Summary of the emerging themes and subthemes

Themes (Challenges)	Issues related to students	Concerns related to classroom	Non-academic tasks	Concerns related to professionalism	Policy or institutional requirement/ practice
Subthemes (Examples)	1. Students' attendance 2. Students' attention in class 3. Students' attitude towards learning 4. Students' behavior towards lecturers 5. Students' participation in class 6. Students' proficiency	1. Unconducive venue for classroom (replacement and assessment purposes) 2. Big class size (35-40 students) 3. Mix ability students (big gap between high proficient & low proficient in a class)	1. Updating attendance 2. Marking papers (PPSMTI research & MSK report) 3. Writing reports 4. Participating in MQA audit 5. Involving in students' activity (English Festival)	1. Inadequate received knowledge (non-TESL background) 2. Non English speaking environment in office 3. Need to collaborate with industries (content development) 4. Lack of language courses/ workshops	1. Attending external course 2. Attending in-house course and training 3. Lack of effort from the administrators in imparting new implementation of the policy (new syllabus introductory)

language learning drawbacks such as students' proficiency, attitude and behaviour, they also had to manage other unrelated teaching concerns like students' attention, participation, attendance and class size. It may relate to the fact that polytechnic students excelled in their subject content skill and knowledge, but were relatively poor in their language command [5]. Thus, extra efforts from the lecturers were always welcomed. In these cases, the lecturers were *willing to practice drilling as to get only an answer* for a classroom task. In a way, this effort could have trigger students' attention and participation in the class but sadly it did not work out. It was *unfair to the high proficient students to be dragged into this kind of learning* environment. Other than that, the lecturers made use of *their diplomacy sense* if the *students forgot the previous lesson or they came in late to the class*, yet the *students were weakly expressed their respect to the lecturers*. Thus, in this *mix-ability of students' context*, the lecturers' efforts were somehow viewed as worthless efforts. The students, too, did not really have any intentions to put more on theirs. Hence, students' hesitancy to actively and willingly participate in the classroom activities does not lessen their anxiousness or does not improve their sense of comfort and confidence to use the language. That is why students nowadays are considered as 'not work-ready' graduates for future job positions by their potential employers [13].

Since the existing efforts from lecturers' part are less likely to succeed, there is an alternative to overcome this issue, segregating the students based on their proficiency levels that transcend their permanent subject-content tutorial groups. It can be done by addressing their English SPM result or English GPA from the previous semester. It can also be run by sitting for requirement on diagnostic test as an entry point for the English subject starting from their first semester. Institutional administrators could help the lecturers on this matter. By doing so, more centralized distribution of the students in a class will be based on their level of proficiency in which mostly helpful to the

language lecturers in adjusting their English teaching and learning expectations. They may, at the same time, able to reflect on their own practice in order to pinpoint the areas that in the need of 'mending' [12]. Both ways help to increase the effectiveness of the language lesson output.

Discussion 2: Next, the mention of participants' non-academic task and concerns related to their professionalism hinted a clue that participants' undefined job scope had become another challenge for them in their practice. A list of non-academic task has been identified from the data, in which most of the tasks were promptly being assigned to the participants based on the immediate institutional needs on certain particular matters, e.g. *MQA audit*, *students' activity (English Festival)*, *PPSMTI research* and *Minggu Suai Kenal (MSK) report*. Other than that, there were also frequent mentioned of actions on updating their teaching portfolio, which is *Fail Rekod Pensyarah (FRP)*, particularly in term of *monitoring attendance and marking*. All these exposures indirectly brought diverse administrative aspects to the language lecturers and tested their informal management skills to their teaching routine, which is a good thing. It is undeniable that experiential knowledge is equally important as lecturers' formal teacher education background [4], yet this particular job inventory consumed most of the lecturers' time and occupied their personal space that led to undefined workloads, which is a cliché constraint experienced by other educators regardless of their institutions [8], [10], [12], [26].

Thus, one practical alternative can be taken into account would be the maximum collaboration within colleagues, non-academic staff as well as students' involvement. In this manner, the concepts of permanent support team [26], experiential learning [24] and trustworthiness [9] are effectively meaningful to be instilled and enculturated into language lecturers' work routine. Likely, the language learning environment does not only take place inside the classroom, it may also provide the native environment exposure to others who

are actively involved with the lecturers' job progress and students' social circles. Hence, the notion of the 'discourse community' [19] concerns can be alienated due to the familiar environment of open interactions - using minimum English - would be shared by all levels of community in polytechnics' context. Subsequently, it promotes self-regulated learning [9] to the other subject content lecturers, non-academic staff and students, or the language lecturers themselves, in practicing and improving their language proficiency. In addition, the students may experience an example of real English spoken communication in working environment which could familiarize them with their future working expectation.

Discussion 3: Lastly, the identified excerpts that centred on classroom related concerns and policy or institutional requirement or practice issues were concluded as the final source of participants' challenges in teaching English to their students. Apart from the aforementioned points, the participants were obliged to constantly fulfill institutional policy such as *attending external and in-house courses* which were *none regarded their needs on the language content improvement*. Examples of the continuous professional courses they attended are *Kursus Tatacara Pengurusan Aset Alih, Module Design Course, OBE course and X-Compile using CIDOS Workshop*. Other than that, participants were required to *implement a new syllabus without a proper workshop or detailed briefing* regarding the application of *Communicative English syllabi*. They *were left alone to figure it out* as the dissemination of the implementation information was briefly conducted by Head of Unit who had limited knowledge on the new policy too which may possibly due to organizational working culture [8]. To increase more alarm to these, the lack of facility issue (i.e. *unconducive venue for replacement class or insufficient space in normal classrooms to occupy big size classes*) was also highlighted as a participants' constraint in carrying out their teaching. In most common ground, they needed to act on their own term in order to ensure the lessons could be carry out in their most proper ways even *the class session had to be conducted in the library*. Thus, based on these results, it can be assumed that the institutional practice and policy and lack of administrative supports acted as deteriorating factors that increase lecturers' burden to be fully committed to their core practice, which is teaching. It is a serious threat to the lecturers' professional development [12]. This consequence may influence the whole teaching process

that directly affects the students. As stated by [4], the instructional decisions made and actions displayed are influenced by lecturers' belief related to their practice. So, what if, the lecturers view the abovementioned 'threat' as their never-ending list of works, one-way solution alternative and undefined job scope that acted as deteriorating factors in their practice. The question on their teaching and learning process quality may be arisen from time to time. In addition, this source of challenge makes them felt inadequate in terms of their *non-TESL background, awareness of current industrial demand and recent ELT inputs* due to lack of external supports [4], [8], [9].

So, there is no other way to deal with this matter except that the higher administrators in that particular institution admit the flaws and then come out with workable short term and long term action plans to re-align their executive yearly planning or annual strategic plan. They can impose a general order to maximize the usage of existence facilities in the premise. It is also appreciated that the glimpse of language lecturers' work nature could be publically acknowledged to other subject content lecturers and vice versa so that both sides become aware of each other routine. In certain extent, the subject content lecturers could offer 'win-win' approaches to the language lecturers on the basis of striving for excellence in their teaching practice. Furthermore, the culture of in-house training programmes and interdisciplinary research collaboration could be re-promoted and introduced as part of the polytechnics' working environment culture. This cultural element can be a massive positive impact to the content expert lecturers of language, or any other fields, to incorporate their knowledge, skill and experience to be internally shared with the less competent or novice content lecturers, or the lecturers of different disciplines. This general institutional implication tunes with what have been agreed by [26], to which extent that the teaching and learning process is challenging and complex and it incorporates many different role players and variety of different factors that need to be considered, then all players must bring their parts to the successful learning mission, particularly to the higher education institution students.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to identify the challenges faced by polytechnic lecturers in teaching English via exploration into their reflective practice. The findings can be used to describe the reality of ELT practice.

The challenges listed in lecturers' job scope may indirectly contribute to the concerns of poor English command among the polytechnic students which could be used to guide the responsible party to acknowledge this issue and act upon it. Spelling out flaws may call active attention from different others, but the responses can be a practical solution to the undefined connected issues of lecturers' workload and students' proficiency. For future research, the limitation of the case study design in term of its contextual setting, sample size and profundity of the data should be put into consideration in gaining more phenomenological features of the research topic. In addition, the empirical or comparative studies on current polytechnic students' English proficiency based on the latest 'Tracer Study' result should also be carried out to set the current overview of students' potential since they are the main challenge to the language lecturers' teaching practice. Finally, the findings of this study contribute to the recent literature on an initial overview on polytechnic lecturers' ELT practice to other English teachers in different institutions, or other researchers.

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