TESL Trainee Teachers' Workplace Competencies (English Language Skills) and the Workplace Expectations

Nurdiyana Mohamad Yusof*
diyanayusof1692@gmail.com
Academy of Language Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA, UiTM Tapah Campus, Perak

Marina Mohd Arif
marina363@uitm.edu.my
Faculty of Education
UiTM Puncak Alam Campus, Puncak Alam, Selangor

Fatin Aliana Mohd Radzi
fatin777@uitm.edu.my
Faculty of Education
UiTM Puncak Alam Campus, Puncak Alam, Selangor

Corresponding author*

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia recognizes the crucial role of English as a global language, especially in driving economic growth and technological development. While the government has made efforts to improve English proficiency, concerns persist about the language skills of students and graduates. Recent initiatives have emphasized the importance of English competency assessments, particularly for civil servants. However, a significant gap remains between the English language proficiency required by industries and the skills demonstrated by graduates, especially those from non-English programs. This study focused on assessing the English

language proficiency of TESL trainee instructors. Through interviews with English teachers and classroom observations aligned with CEFR standards, the study found that most TESL trainees are rated as proficient in English and express confidence in their teaching abilities. These findings align with the government's goal of enhancing English proficiency among teachers. However, the study also suggests that there is room for improvement in TESL teacher training programs to ensure that graduates are equipped with the necessary skills to effectively teach English in Malaysian schools.

Keywords: English language, TESL, trainee teachers, workplace competencies

INTRODUCTION

English is a vital global language, especially in the context of economic and technological development. Malaysia's efforts to improve English proficiency aim to enhance its international competitiveness and attract foreign investment, leading to job creation. A 2018 directive from the former Prime Minister highlighted the importance of English language assessments for civil servants. Despite these efforts, a significant gap persists between the English skills of graduates and the requirements of the job market. The 2019 Education First English Proficiency Index (EPI) report confirmed that advanced English proficiency is crucial for employability in global industries.

Despite its critical importance, Malaysia has shown a consistent decline in the Education First English Proficiency Index from 2011 to 2019. Malaysia dropped from the ninth place among the 44 countries mentioned in 2011 to the 26th spot in 2019 (Education First, 2019). There have been outspoken declarations in favor of the importance of the English language, such as the focus on the language's position in the country through the most recent reform of the English Education Roadmap 2015 – 2025 that is entailed within the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 – 2025. This road map includes an updated framework for the creation of curriculum and teaching materials, the advancement of English teachers, and an internationally recognized standardized assessment that will be used at all educational levels (Abu Bakar et al., 2021). However, studies that are specifically conducted on the educators, particularly in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), remain scarce as previous investigations were primarily focusing on the employers' perceptions towards the employees' English competence within the industries. Due to the dearth of studies in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) despite the significance of English for the growth of a country. The researcher is eager to investigate the soon-to-be English teachers of the country, this study investigates the workplace competencies of TESL trainee instructors as viewed by the teachers in schools, specifically by practicum mentors and heads of English department in schools.

PAPER FORMAT

Linguistic proficiency is seen as the most important quality that a second language teacher should possess (Sardabi et al., 2018). They said that instructors' language skills reflect a certain level of quality in their classroom experiences. When teachers specialize in the four language

skills that will be used in the classrooms, they are considered language experts (Freeman, 2017). According to a poll conducted in Italy, high school teachers in that country are proficient in all four language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. As more meaningful and interesting activities were carried out by proficient teachers, the findings showed that the teachers' competency had a beneficial influence on the learning quality (Valmori & De Costa, 2016). Additionally, it can be concluded that proficient teachers also have a higher tendency to use an interactive approach during lessons, aligning with earlier studies that discovered a link between the competence of the teacher and the efficiency of the teaching and learning session (Richards et al., 2013). According to the findings of the same study, student teachers who participated in teacher education programs have superior speaking and writing abilities when compared to other institutions across Italy (Richards et al., 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to ascertain whether a comparable outcome would be attained in the Malaysian context.

In Malaysia, it is reported that among English language teachers who sat for the Cambridge Evaluation Study, majority of them attained a minimum C1 level of CEFR and some even managed to score the highest level of C2 proficiency. This indicates that majority of Malaysian teachers belongs in the proficient user range and would be able to "express fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions and use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes" (Ministry of Education, 2017). Another positive conclusion was made in a study which discovered that 20 English teachers in elementary schools had the necessary competency at the C1 level of the CEFR (Chong & Yamat, 2021). In addition, similar studies conducted on English teachers from Johor (Alih et al., 2020) as well as the 500 English primary teachers from all states in Malaysia (Kaur & Jian, 2022) both achieved similar results.

However, local studies have also showed a contradictory result with regards to this issue, despite the positive findings of the English instructors' CEFR ability. These studies have revealed that more than 15000 English teachers, or more than half of the total population of English teachers, were unable to become CEFR-adapted, and to make matters worse, they failed to meet the CEFR's C1 level minimal criterion (Nawai & Said, 2020). The Ministry of Education has reason to be concerned about this situation because the students may suffer as a result of the English teachers' incapacity and ignorance of the CEFR. Similar findings were found in numerous studies conducted in recent years, which showed that despite numerous attempts at passing proficiency tests, more than 60% of English teachers have yet to successfully reach the CEFR proficiency level of C1 (Nawawi et al., 2021). Regrettably, it was observed that a number of English teachers even refused to take part in any of these tests (Shukor & Sulaiman, 2022). Given the importance of English proficiency in the teaching profession, there is an increased need for research on ESL trainee teachers' language proficiency in Malaysia, despite the fact that extensive research has been done on English teachers' proficiency in Malaysia. Thus, this study will further explore whether the English language proficiency of TESL trainee instructors meets the standard desired within the teaching profession.

METHODOLOGY

For this particular study, data from the English language teachers' interview served as the

primary source of data. this primary data is supported with the data from the teacher trainees' practicum observations. The interview focused on obtaining data on TESL trainee teachers' proficiency level in relation to the CEFR standard used in Malaysia's public schools. They will be asked to rate the TESL trainee teachers' English proficiency based on the CEFR level. The researcher also observed the TESL trainee teachers throughout their practicum in order to triangulate the data obtained from the interview. During the practicum observations, the Practicum Supervision Form (PR1) and Summary of Trainee's Performance Form (PR2) were used to evaluate the TESL trainee teachers' language proficiency. The practicum observations were conducted based on the suitability with the researcher's schedule as well as the TESL trainee teachers'. Generally, 4 trainee teachers were observed in a week and each of their lesson was recorded and field notes were taken to remark on any significant issues happened inside the classrooms.

Using the ATLAS.ti program to identify the themes or codes of the responses, the data analysis is initially conducted by thematically analyzing the interview responses of the English teachers. As this software integrates the thematic analysis mode, the interview responses were categorized into smaller themes that would explain the phenomemon. In order to get a more exact and in-depth comprehension of the phenomena, the researcher then took notes on the performance of the TESL trainee teachers during the practicum observation and the remarks were verified into the discussion of the data analysis. Additionally, it is essential to highlight that the schools involved in this research were among the ones that received the permission from the District Education Office. A list of schools were proposed by the private university for the teaching practicum purposes and the final list of the schools that received the approval were utilized for the data collection processes. Henceforth, the English teachers that were interviewed consisted of the educators from the respective schools that had received the consent by the District Education Office.

FINDINGS

Findings from the interview with 30 English instructors from public secondary schools in the Klang Valley area of Selangor indicated that majority of the sample, or 27 out of the English instructors thought the TESL trainee teachers have adequate level of English proficiency. Some of the positive remarks regarding the TESL trainee teachers' English language skills are cited in the following interview excepts:

> "Teacher 1: "All of the trainees have the adequate language skill just for the students to understand on what they are being taught…I think among the four skills, their speaking skill is the best".

> "Teacher 9: "They have a good command of English, especially in writing and speaking skill which these two are the most important skills a teacher should have in order to teach English language in classroom"

> "Teacher 12: Yes, they do have the competence in those four skills. it is adequate for teaching and communicating with the teachers and other staffs of the school.

The trainee teachers performed well throughout their practicum".

Additionally, the English teachers also noted that the TESL trainee teachers are good in utilizing the language effortlessly with their students:

"Teacher 13: "Yes, they do possess the adequacy needed as a teacher. All of the four skills are used successfully during teaching and when they are interacting with the other teachers and students. they could speak spontaneously and I don't think they have major errors when using the language"

"Teacher 25: "I think their language skills are good for the teaching field. They could utilize all the skills effectively inside and outside of the classrooms. For me all of the 4 skills are adequate, even their accent is really great and sounds professional".

These extracts warrant the TESL trainee teachers' capability to use the English language well in their teaching. This is also an indication that the TESL trainee teachers are prepared to enter the teaching profession because an educator's speaking ability is strongly linked to students' learning outcomes as it is found that there are connections between teachers' language proficiency and the caliber of the instruction. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is the current benchmark used for all English teachers in public schools in Malaysia and is in accordance with the "English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap for 2015–2025." Teachers with higher CEFR levels possess a deeper understanding of the language, enabling them to provide more accurate explanations, use authentic materials, and engage in meaningful conversations with students. This leads to a more effective and immersive learning experience, as students are exposed to the language in a natural and authentic context. Additionally, teachers with higher CEFR levels can better adapt their teaching methods to cater to students' individual needs and learning styles, fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. In relation to the CEFR context, the English teachers were asked to grade the TESL trainee teachers in accordance with the CEFR standard. Their responses were as follow:

"Teacher 5: "If I can rate, I might give them a C1 level because they are good actually, they can speak spontaneously and ideas are great"

"Teacher 7: "I would rate then C1 for the CEFR level. All of the four skills are prominent, none is lacking as far as I'm concerned"

"Teacher 10: "The level suitable for them would be C1 or C2. This is the current level needed for English school teachers at school. I think they are equipped for that".

In addition, some of the English teachers interviewed deem the TESL trainee teachers to be rather advanced with their English language proficiency as most students in the schools might not be able to comprehend the TESL trainee teachers in certain circumstances:

"Teacher 17: "I think they are at C1 level, too high for our school actually. Most

students here are only at A1 or A2 level. This is good though, that the trainee teachers are great with their English. They are well prepared to be English teachers"

"Teacher 18: "I think the trainees are actually proficient with the language, maybe C1? Some of the students can't understand them because they talked too fast sometimes. They need to slow down"

"Teacher 28: Ok for the CEFR, I guess they are C2 because their skills are great and I never seen them making mistakes when using the language. What I like about them is they are confident with their English; they don't look too shy or worried. They are fluent and use it smoothly. Yes, they are ready to serve in our national schools".

As stated by the English teachers, these TESL trainee teachers are regarded to be proficient in accordance to the CEFR standard due to their excellence in the usage of the English language as well as their competence in effortlessly and confidently interacting great ideas during their teaching and learning sessions. This signifies that almost all of the English teachers believe that the trainee teachers have adequate English language skills and are ready to serve in the public schools in Malaysia.

This notion corroborates with the researcher's own experience while observing the students' behaviour in the current study, as it can be noticed that the TESL trainee teachers with high competency of the English language skill portrayed a high level of confidence while conducting their lessons, which resulted in a dynamic and meaningful learning environment. The students were keen to participate in the activities conducted by the trainee teachers as they could easily comprehend the trainee teachers' instructions. The students also exhibited higher self-esteem while using the English language without being too concerned of making grammatical or pronunciation errors.

However, it is fundamental to note that this study has several limitations such as the number of English teachers interviewed could be increased for future researches as more in-depth understanding could be gained. Addtionally, another limitation would be that the TESL trainee teachers did not undergo any tests to precisely identify their CEFR level and thus, the perceptions of the English teachers could not be generalized in defining the TESL trainee teachetrs' English language competence. These limitations should be improved for scholars that are keen to explore deeper into this context.

To conclude, it could be observed that the school students in the current research were more eager to participate when the TESL trainee teachers exude similar energy during the teaching and learning session. Consequently, it is worthwhile to note that a competent teacher will have positive effect on the students' learning performance and vice versa. Thus, these behaviours observed in the current research corroborate with earlier studies which reveal that the lessons carried out by proficient teachers are more meaningful and interactive, with a higher level of active students' participation throughout the activities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, majority of the secondary school English teachers had regarded the TESL trainee teachers as proficient with their English language mastery. They had the ability to utilize the language spontaneously in various settings and displayed confidence inside and outside of the classrooms. This implies that the TESL trainee teachers are prepared to enter the teaching profession as they had exhibited the level of competence and vigour necessitated in order to be the future English teachers in Malaysia.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Authors' Contributions

Conceptualization, NMY and MMA; literature review, NMY and MMA; methodology, NMY; validation, NMY; formal analysis, NMY; investigation, NMY; resources, NMY, MMA, FAMR; writing – original draft preparation, NMY; writing – review and editing, MMA, FAMR; visualization, NMY; supervision, NMY; project administration, NMY. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

About the Authors

Ms Nurdiyana Mohamad Yusof is a lecturer in the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Tapah Campus, Perak, with a focus on Applied Linguistics and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL).