

Environmental Aspects of Successful English Language Teaching Practices in Rural Sabah Low Enrolment Schools

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Abstract

This study explores the environmental aspects or concepts underlying successful English Language Teaching (ELT) as well as the support needed and the challenges that are faced by a group of primary school teachers in the context of a low enrolment school in a rural area in Sabah, Malaysia. This study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach which involved seven English language teachers who have had more than five years of teaching experience. A set of semi-structured interview questions were formulated to elicit data on the concepts and the conditions that could either help or hinder the incorporation of those concepts in ELT. Qualitative analysis of participants' interview data indicated that exposure to the target language, motivation and goals were the environmental aspects of language teaching practices that affect students' success in second language acquisition. Support from parents, teachers and school authorities were essential in assimilating these aspects in the teaching practices. It was found that the participants expressed tension between what they believed to be good practices and what they were restricted to do due to contextual barriers. Among the main barriers identified in this study were changes in education policy, insufficient financial support and infrastructure as well as lack of monitoring of the execution of activities in schools. Findings in this study have important implications to policy makers and curriculum developers.

Keywords: *English Language Teaching (ELT), low enrolment schools (Sekolah Kurang Murid), successful language teaching, environmental aspects*

Introduction

English is the language that is taught beyond boundaries and the success of learning it depends on certain factors that could be internal or external. A lot of factors have been examined throughout the years in order to understand, identify and improve language teaching practices in language classrooms across the globe. It is evident that some language learners are able to learn a language effortlessly while others are less successful in their attempts to acquire the language. This learning gap is even more obvious between learners in the urban areas and learners in the rural areas particularly in the under-enrolled schools (SKM). These schools are schools which have fewer than 50 pupils and learners of different age groups and levels are usually grouped in the same class (i.e. Year 3 and Year 4 students). According to Mirhadizadeh, “[i]nternal and external factors are generally referred to the elements that exist inside and outside of every individual. Internal

factors are dealt with those elements every individual brings with himself to the learning context and these components are influenced by other (external) factors which persist in the environment that a learner lives in" (2016, p.188). Based on Browns' (2006) definition, external factors may not be the same for each individual, but their common denominator is that they are based solely on the circumstances beyond the learner's control and influence. These environmental aspects inevitably affect the success of language teaching and learning. In this paper, the environmental aspects or factors that affect ELT practices in under-enrolled schools (SKM) are discussed.

Literature Review

One of the primary factors of successful language learning across many studies is the motivation of language learners. Mirhadizadeh (2016) asserted that motivation is a significant affective element in any educational achievement. Miller (2016) likened learning another language to children learning to swim for the first time. Some children might learn a particular skill faster than the others while some would probably take a considerable amount of time to master a newly learned skill. The same goes to language learning. She claims that a child's motivation to learn a language is the main factor which determines the success of learning a language. She believes that if a child starts to understand the importance of understanding a particular language and can see the need for using it, they will learn the language faster. This means that when the learners see the context and meaningful connections between the language and their lives, they will be much more interested and motivated to use the language. This is similar to what Mirhadizadeh (2016) believes as the source of motivation in language learning. He mentioned that how the society views the English language and their attitude towards learning will affect the motivation of the learners to learn the language. This apparently will also affect the teacher's attitude and motivation in teaching the language.

The second factor that has been discussed extensively is the kind of support that language learners get from home or from the school. This is related to the exposure the children have in terms of the language they hear at home and the exposure to English language materials based on their surroundings. Additionally, the level of emphasis parents put on learning another language provides the support needed for a successful language learning experience. It was found that parents and older siblings who placed emphasis on language learning will be more likely to encourage the children to learn the language even with certain limitations (Mirhadizadeh, 2016; Miller, 2016). Mirhadizadeh (2016) also clarified that if the attitude of the family members, teachers and peers are negative towards the subject or activities related to the subject, the student's motivation will be affected. On the contrary, Weiler (2018) mentioned that when students are engaged in a language activity, they would feel an energy that makes them pay attention and get involved in the activity as

they find it rewarding. Thus, the teacher's role in creating a positive classroom atmosphere is vital in increasing and sustaining learners' motivation.

Other factors believed to be significant in language teaching practices are the teaching strategies applied by the teachers and learning strategies practised by the learners. According to Farrell and Jacobs (2010), it is important to know how teachers teach the English language and how the English language learners learn it. The strategies used by the teacher to help the learners understand the concepts of a language have a huge impact on language learning (Miller, 2016). Furthermore, the teacher's goals in language teaching will also affect the language learning environment as positive language learning environment increases the chance for language acquisition.

Krashen (1982) claimed that the language curriculum, which he termed as the language input, also determines the success of a language acquisition. He suggested that the curriculum must reach one level beyond the learners' current stage and they need to be challenged with various activities. Farrell and Jacobs (2010) highlighted that it is crucial that learners understand and develop their own purposes for learning the language rather than learning by grammar drills and rote memorisation. Other than that, a variety of learning models and authentic assessments are also part of the characteristics of a highly effective learning environment (Heick, 2018).

Most studies on successful language practices were done in the urban setting, analysing good language teaching practices of those who are teaching in prestigious schools with amazing results across nations. There are limited studies that focus on the rural setting especially in low enrolment schools in Malaysia. Low enrolment schools are schools that have fewer than 150 students and are usually located in remote areas. Sometimes, the number does not even reach 50 students per school. The Ministry of Education Malaysia has identified the educational gap that exists between the urban and rural schools in order to improve access to infrastructures, equity and quality. In terms of language learning, it is imperative to discover the environmental aspects that affect the language teaching and learning process in these schools as the first step to bridge the gap between urban and rural schools. Therefore, this study aims to discover the voices and opinions of teachers who are teaching in rural schools with small number of learners so that we have a wider perspective on the environmental factors or aspects that could either positively or negatively affect the language teaching and learning processes.

Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following key research questions:

1. What do the teachers in low enrolment schools identify as the most important aspects underlying successful language teaching and learning?
2. What are the kinds of support that facilitate the integration and application of these aspects?
3. What are the challenges or contextual barriers that affect the integration of these aspects?

Methodology

Participants

The study was conducted as an exploratory qualitative case study on practicing language teachers at a rural area in the district of Tambunan, Sabah. Purposive sampling was used to select seven (7) English language teachers who had 6 years to 20 years of teaching experience. They were from five different primary schools. All of which were categorised as low enrolment schools (*Sekolah Kurang Murid*). In these low enrolment schools, there were fewer than 50 students in each school and they usually need to combine different levels (i.e. Year 3 and Year 4 students) in the same class. The sample size was deemed appropriate according to theoretical sampling for qualitative research with expert participants as suggested by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006). Table 4.1.1 shows the demographic information of the participants.

Table 4.1.1 Participants' Demographic Information

Participants	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience	Level Taught
Teacher A	Female	36	9 years	2 (year 4-6)
Teacher B	Male	34	7 years	1 & 2 (year 1-6)
Teacher C	Female	38	9 years	1 (year 1-3)
Teacher D	Male	35	15 years	1 & 2 (year 1-6)
Teacher E	Male	47	16 years	1 & 2 (year 1-6)
Teacher F	Female	43	20 years	1 & 2 (year 1-6)
Teacher G	Female	32	6 years	1 (year 1-3)

Instrument

In order to address the research questions, focus-group interview was conducted in order to gain some general feedback and input on the participants' experiences in their classrooms. Semi-structured interview questions were formulated to elicit self-reflection insights on what the teachers believe to be the aspects or factors underlying good language teaching in the context of their personal beliefs and observations as English language teachers. A follow-up interview session was conducted in order to further clarify the responses given by the teachers to avoid misinterpretations of data.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis of participants' interviews in relation to the research questions. Data were initially coded into categories and emerging themes were then compared to refine the categories.

Findings and Discussions

This section discusses the findings to the research questions in relation to the aspects articulated by the participants. These aspects were articulated as core beliefs that were practically observed by the teachers as suggested by Phipps and Borg (2009).

Important aspects underlying successful language teaching and learning (RQ1)

Based on the findings, three important aspects were identified as significant to the practices of successful language teaching and learning. These include exposure to the target language, motivation and goals, as well as support from administrators, parents and teachers. The results address the first research question: 1) What do the teachers in low enrolment schools identify as the most important aspects underlying successful language teaching?

Exposure to the target language

The first of these aspects is related to the amount of exposure to the target language in schools and outside of the school boundaries among the students especially in a rural area where access to the Internet, media and resources are limited. One teacher claimed that the students are lacking in exposure and guidance in using the target language:

Teacher B: I think it is the communication barrier, and I think they will get and try to understand it better soon. They are also lack of guidance at home from their parents. Because everything they

learn, they only learn it at school and that's it. When at home, they want to study more and ask their parents but most of their parents are not good in English language.

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2020

Another teacher highlighted this concern on exposure to the target language:

Teacher D: *Since most of them, their first language is Dusun, they are not getting much interaction exposure in English language since their childhood. Most of the students here, have never even listened to the English kids learning songs (nursery rhymes). While, if the people are from the town, they are used to that kind of kids' songs.*

The majority of the teachers interviewed expressed that maximum exposure to the English language materials is fundamental in helping the learners to learn the language successfully and at the same time, motivating the teachers to teach the target language. The findings are relevant to the findings of Devitt and McKendry (2014, p.2) where they concluded that learners need real language use through "...immersive environment through the use of the target language".

In fact, research has shown that in acquiring the spoken language in early childhood, children normally succeed in using languages over a period of several years provided that they have sufficient opportunities to use them (Brown & Spada, 2006). This proves how important it is for the learners to immerse themselves in an English language environment be it at school or at home. However, this is a great challenge for low enrolment schools since most of the students are predominantly from low-income families who could not afford to provide such exposure outside of the classroom context. Most parents could not speak in the English language and they depend solely on the role of the teacher to teach the language to their children.

Motivation and goals

The second aspect is related to motivation and goals that are shared among the teachers and students. Most of the teachers claimed that they are motivated to teach the English language because they feel that English is important and believed that the students should learn and master basic English language skills. They feel that students need to learn the basic skills in order to survive in the future environment.

Teacher D: *For me, the importance of English language and at least if they are exposed to only basic English language, they can survive or get used to the different area. Means that, with English, the children can go far.*

Teacher E: *As for me, this is my people and at least can equip them with English language for their future. Sometimes, I am thinking what will happen if they don't learn English language.*

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Due to these beliefs, as well as geographical limitations and limited exposure to the English language materials, the teachers' motivation and goals are merely geared towards equipping the students with basic skills like reading, speaking and writing in English. To them, getting the students to read, speak and write in English is enough to call it successful language learning.

Teacher G: *What motivates me to teach English better is that this language is a language that they are not familiar with. So, to me, if the students are able to write some words in English, count and read a simple paragraph, that gives me the satisfaction and it is successful for me.*

Teacher B: *Personally, I think as long as the students are able to understand, speak, read and write in English, that is already successful.*

Teacher C: *As long as they can interact in English and their understanding in English is getting better.*

Two of the teachers also mentioned that they were motivated to teach the English language because they were interested in the language and they enjoyed seeing the students having fun while learning English. Thus, they suggested that schools should organise more activities that would make students think and learn about new things. According to them, teaching materials in the form of flashcards, videos, songs, as well as tools such as LCD projector, computers and good Internet connection would help to create a successful and interesting teaching and learning environment. This has also been highlighted by Agarwal and Thakur (2014) who have indicated that up-to-date teaching materials could help students to think in English actively and provide conducive learning environment. They further claimed that, “[t]hrough all kinds of the modern teaching technologies, they could create more scenes of English learning” (*ibid*, p.7). This will encourage learners to speak English in class.

The kinds of support which facilitate the integration and application of the environmental aspects (RQ2)

The teachers' interview responses indicated that support from the Head of the school (headmaster), other teachers, parents and the District Education Office (*Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah*) is of paramount importance in organising any English language activities in the schools. One teacher stated that part of the success of the language activities conducted could be attributed to the headmaster's encouragement to allow students and their parents to participate in the activities. The teachers also mentioned that the District Education Office has organised a lot of English language activities in the area, especially at beginner's level.

Teacher G: From what I have observed, moral support is really good in the schools especially the support from the headmaster for allowing the participants to join the activities. Next, support from the parents and teachers in spending their time to join their kids in the programmes is also important. On the other hand, PPD has put a great emphasis on English language learning activities in the area. Aside from this programme, PPD also had conducted workshops with the help of the teachers as the working committee. These programmes focused on students who are illiterate.

As mentioned in the excerpt, the activities conducted at the school received encouraging participation and support from the parents. According to Agarwal and Thakur (2014), support from the parents and school environment is crucial in language learning. In the English language learning process, the parents and schools need to provide a healthy, peaceful and harmonious learning environment for the learners.

Another teacher shared that the language activities they conducted received overwhelming responses from the students even though at times, some of the students did not understand what they were doing. The teacher said that most of their students are not familiar with the English language and they also perceive it as a difficult language to master. Some even fear the language. As a result, the teachers normally resorted to using both *Bahasa Melayu* and English in teaching and, thus, having the students to speak in *Bahasa Melayu* in class is a normal scenario in their classroom setting.

Nevertheless, the teacher said that whenever the students had a chance to do hands-on practices, they would still do their best to complete the activities even when their answers could be wrong. This can be linked to Land and Meyer's (2003) concept of liminality and mimicry, the state in which students are stuck in between what they think they know and what is expected of them to know. In other words, students were still able to complete a given task without internalising what they learned (Land, Cousin, Meyer & Davies, 2005). Consequently, students might not be attaining essential lifelong language skills for real communication using the language.

Teacher G: *Honestly, English is one language that they really fear probably because they are not confident and they think English is difficult and they are not familiar with the language. So when they are in class, it is difficult for them to speak in English and they choose to speak in BM (Bahasa Melayu). Sometimes, even the teachers need to switch between English and BM... But, from their attitude, initially they are scared but when I do hands-on activities, they still try to do it even though what they do might be wrong. In the activity, they tried to participate but their fear of the English language is really obvious.*

In order to make sure the learners benefit from the activities, Johnson (1996) suggested that activities should focus on immersion experience which would help learners to associate the language learning to their everyday lives, and not on rote vocabulary memorisation and grammar drills which might not be meaningful to the learners. Once they see that the language learning is meaningful to them, they might not be ‘afraid’ of using the language anymore.

The challenges or contextual barriers that affect the integration of these aspects (RQ3)

This section discusses the findings in relation to the third research question. In some instances, the participants expressed tensions between what they believed to be good practices and what they were restricted to do due to external or contextual barriers. This is summarised in Table 5.3.

Table 5.3 Support and Contextual Barriers

Support	Barriers
Support from school administration, teachers and parents	Changes in education policy or syllabus
Variety of English language materials	Financial support from the authorities
Outreach programmes	Lack of monitoring from the authorities
	Execution of activities in the school
	Insufficient infrastructures especially ICT equipment and Internet connection

The main contextual barrier identified was the constant changes in education policy or syllabus. These changes were viewed negatively by two of the teachers because the teachers believed that the changes of syllabus and textbooks brought limitations to the teaching and learning process. It can be concluded that teachers find it troublesome to constantly change their lesson plans to suit the students' needs as well as to align them with the new syllabus. One teacher claimed that the changes would be troublesome specifically for the low enrolment schools because they had classes with mixed levels or age groups (i.e. year 3 and year 4 students are combined) and the changes normally took place in phases. This situation created problems when year 3 students used a new syllabus contrary to year 4 students who were still using the old syllabus. Teachers would then need to come up with different lesson plans for the two different groups and two different syllabi. This undoubtedly inconveniences the teachers in terms of classroom management.

Another teacher stated that teachers would also need to be prepared to attend workshops due to the changes in the syllabus. One issue that arises is that teachers will need some time to adapt to the new changes and sometimes before they have familiarised themselves with a new syllabus, another change takes place. Another problem is that the new syllabus is mostly influenced by Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR); a guideline used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe and other countries. Therefore, students are not familiar with the context as some of the content is foreign to them. This makes it harder for the students to internalise the concepts taught. According to Krashen (1982), if the materials are not appealing to the students, they will be disinterested in the lesson and will not be engaged in the lesson. This explains why the teachers think that the syllabus change is negatively affecting the language learning.

Some other factors that emerged from this study were lack of financial support and lack of monitoring from the authorities. These factors eventually affect the execution of school activities. One teacher claimed that a lot of activities and workshops were organised by the ministry for the teachers which emphasised on writing skills and the use of English language in the classrooms. However, when it comes to real practice, some teachers could not apply the activities or concepts in schools due to time constraints, lack of availability of materials and lack of monitoring from the authorities. Therefore, frequent monitoring from the authorities is needed to ensure that the practices and activities are applied in schools.

Moreover, the teachers also had infrastructure problems such as limited Internet connection and insufficient ICT equipment. Part of the reason is that the geographical location of the schools, which is in remote area

and isolated from the town, impedes or restricts the Internet access to the schools. As a result, students at these schools do not get much exposure beyond the rural environment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study explored the environmental aspects of language teaching practices in the context of low enrolment schools in a rural area where access to educational facilities and ICT is limited. The teachers in this study agreed that exposure to the English language use and materials, as well as motivation and support are the most important aspects that determine the success of language learning. They believed that teachers, learners, parents and the authorities need to be more aware of what is happening in schools. Exposure to English language activities and materials should also be given attention. Moreover, teachers expressed concerns over the motivation of their fellow colleagues as well as the interest of their learners. They believed that motivation should not only come from the learners but also from parents, authorities and the Education Ministry who should work together to support the English language activities in schools by getting involved in the planning and execution of the activities. Apart from that, providing either moral or financial support is also important. All of these are vital to provide the learners with maximum exposure to the English language learning environment.

The study also found that the contextual barriers in the language teaching and learning environment affect the integration of the essential factors discussed above. These barriers include changes in education policy, financial support, the monitoring and execution of activities in schools as well as the provision of infrastructure. This suggests that in order for schools to have a successful language teaching and learning environment, these barriers need to be minimised. More funding or allocation to improve the infrastructures in low enrolment schools to bridge the gap between urban schools and rural schools should be provided by the Ministry of Education. Apart from that, low enrolment schools should be given the same opportunities and exposure to the English language environment as much as their urban counterparts.

The findings, therefore, suggest that there is a tension between what the teachers believed as helpful in language teaching and the real practices of the school culture. As a result, there is a mismatch between the idealised practice and the actual practice. Thus, any language activities, practices and changes in curriculum should be carefully considered to make sure that students can and will benefit from meaningful lessons. Skills learnt from meaningful lessons then can be applied in students' real-life experiences of using the Eng-

lish language. It is high time that English language classrooms ditch the practices of mere memorisation and grammar drills.

Further research needs to be conducted to have a deeper understanding on how these environmental factors affect students' internal aspects or threshold concepts in second language learning. Furthermore, policy makers and curriculum developers need to find ways to help teachers and learners overcome the "epistemological obstacles" while creating a positive liminal environment that would help learners progress through such challenges and move towards transformative learning.

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