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Communication Skills of Excellent Teachers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Background: In this study, the researchers provide an analysis of teacher communication skills within the framework of the communicative language teaching using communicative approach. The aim is to determine English as Second Language (ESL) excellent teachers' communication skills as displayed in their second language (L2) classrooms. This study explored the communication skills used by ESL secondary excellent teachers. Data were collected from 10 class hours of video recordings. The study supports better quality teacher communication, with regard to classroom communication, communicative activities and teacher - student interaction.

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INTRODUCTION

The quality of teachers plays an important role in producing good quality of teaching. To produce professional teachers, effective measures must be identified to raise the standard of the teaching profession. Teachers are the important and critical target group to take this challenge (Wan Mohd Zahid, 2003). This further indicates that teachers are the sole factor to help achieve excellence in education. Teachers are responsible to impart knowledge to the students and it is important that teachers are able to master every form of skills including class control, teaching techniques, and the use of effective communication skills. In the teaching and learning context, communication plays an important role in the classroom because exchange of knowledge takes place between one individual to another and from one group to another (Ahmad Shukri, 2002). Subsequently, teachers with good teaching techniques will be able to draw the students' attention in the teaching and learning process (Abdullah & Ainon, 2002; Kogut & Silver, 2009). The introduction of the New Secondary School Integrated Curriculum (NSSIC) into Malaysian secondary schools has brought changes in the traditional classroom roles of teachers and students. For the teacher, the NSSIC requires a shift away from the traditional strategies of teacher-dominated and teacher-directed classes. Teachers are encouraged to develop a strategy of encouraging learners to take a more active role in their own learning. The main focus of the curriculum is on an

integrated educational approach. The approach incorporates knowledge with skills and moral values. It also combines theory with practical training, curriculum with co-curriculum. Within the NSSIC, the Communicative Approach (CA) to language teaching and learning advocates the teaching and learning of second languages to enable learners to communicate with other speakers of the second language (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). Since the early 1970's, language teaching methodology has been largely concerned with developing communicative competence, that is, knowing what to say, to whom, and how to say it, and communication strategies (Savignon, 2007). Theoretical and empirical investigations in the field of communicative language teaching (CLT) resulted in the development of several models of communicative competence (Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990), which are currently used worldwide. The focus on the learner and the emphasis on communication made CLT highly popular among ESL teachers. According to Kenneth (2007), without communication, the teaching and learning process will not take place. Therefore, teachers with good communication skills will create a more successful teaching and learning ambience for the students. Bleach (2000) states that, in general, teachers of English assume that they can communicate well. However, when their oral communication skills are analyzed, they face a variety of difficulties (Bleach, 2000). They have the challenge of how best to convey their messages and how to remain in the communication until they achieve their communicative purpose. On the other

hand, someone with great communication skills has the potential to influence others and effective communication strategies will lead to success (Canale, 1983; Bygate, 2003; Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). In order for this to happen, teachers must be satisfied in their work to produce an effected teaching that will frame quality students. Moreover, in Malaysia, Hashim Adnan, (NST, Aug 8, 2011) National Union of the Teaching Profession President, states that the reason for the students' poor level of English is not the curriculum but the fault of teachers. This is closely linked to their language proficiency. From the major finding of the survey, Malaysian Education Ministry deputy director-general Datuk Dr Khair Mohamad Yusof revealed that two-thirds of 70,000 English teachers in Malaysia failed to reach a proficient English level when the initial profiling of the English teachers in Malaysia was made. As a result, the teachers were required to sit for the Cambridge Placement Test and to attend the Professional Up-skilling of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT) to enhance proficiency as well as pedagogic competence (MOE, 2013). Underlying this is the belief that it may be a potentially important first step towards a deeper understanding of English teachers' knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities in keeping abreast with rapid changes in knowledge and methodology. This situation then leads the teacher to choose a whole class instruction with aims to teach, manage and instruct the students altogether easily. In reaching those aims, teachers should have good communication skills such as explaining, questioning and listening (Farrell, 2009). Hence, in light of the statement, the present study appears to be one of the few and one of the first that puts weight on the interaction and communication of the teachers. In Malaysia, there is a lack of research conducted on teachers' communication skills (Roselan, 2001; Syofia, Zamri, Jamaludin & Hamidah, 2012; Rozita & Abdul Rashid, 2012). Most studies have been conducted with *Bahasa Melayu* excellent teachers. Rozita and Abdul Rashid (2012), investigate the practice of teaching writing of five *Bahasa Melayu* excellent teachers in the classroom. In the study, the practice of teaching writing in *Bahasa Melayu* by the language teachers in the classroom focuses on teacher's verbal application including variety of ways in teaching writing using various approaches, methods and techniques that are planned, prepared, developed, and concluded with assessments and feedbacks. Thus, this study seeks to explore English language excellent teachers' communication skills. Teachers' communication skills are important for teaching English language in Malaysia because the English curriculum focuses on the communicative language teaching (CLT) using communicative approach (CA) towards developing students' communicative competence. This led to a shift away from a focus on accuracy and the forms of language,

to a focus on communication and fluency. In other words, instead of focusing on the sentence level forms, it centers on discourse level functions. With its emphasis on fluency over accuracy, and a focus on encouraging learners to communicate their messages and intentions using the linguistic resources available to them, teachers should model and acquire effective communication skills when teaching, therefore, there is a need for such study.

This research chooses to study "excellent" teachers because the Malaysian Ministry of Education has defined Excellent Teacher as teachers with excellent personality, knowledge and skills, excellent work performance, communication, and an excellent potential for professional growth. Moreover, it is relevant to study the best from the best and that is to observe whether excellent teachers are competent communicators and how they practise their communication skills in everyday teaching. In addition, their communication skills can be used as benchmarks when evaluating or assessing other teachers' communication skills.

Finally, the focus of this study is on English Excellent Teachers and their communicative competencies as teachers, their communication skills and communication strategies in their teaching contexts in order to elucidate good practices which correspond to the English language teaching principles and features to be shared with other English teachers in the classroom settings. This study of ESL teachers' communication skills in their teaching contexts is significant for many reasons. First, this study would address the paucity of research documenting teachers' communication skills in relation to teaching practices. The lack of research attention to the challenges of communication skills in classroom communication would introduce a gap in ESL professionals' and general educators' knowledge. The population of ESL teachers in Malaysia has grown steadily in the last few decades (Teacher Education Division, 2007), yet communication skills of teachers remained unknown (Harison Mohd Sidek, 2010). Little is known about how ESL teachers are dealing with their communication skills when teaching (Hazlina, Nik Suryani & Airil Haimi, 2012). This study would therefore, start with the excellent ESL teachers because they are supposed to be the benchmark. This study is apparently one of the first few attempts to investigate excellent teachers in terms of communication skills in the Malaysian ESL secondary classrooms. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be an eye opener and provide much understanding regarding the excellent teachers' communication skills and practices in the country.

Methodology:

Second language classroom research is the kind of research that is carried out in language classrooms for the purpose of answering important questions

about the learning and teaching of foreign languages (Johnson, 2009; Nunan & Bailey, 2009). This kind of research derives its data from either genuine foreign language classrooms, specifically for the purpose of language learning and teaching, or in experimental laboratory settings that are set up for the purpose of research. Classroom research can focus on teachers or on learners, or on the interaction between teachers and learners (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). Learner-focused research looks at, for example, the learners' learning style and strategies, the interaction between learners and the effect of this interaction on learner language development. Research that focuses on teachers usually examines such factors as the teachers' classroom decision-making processes, and what is referred to as 'teacher talk'. Teacher talk consists of the kinds of questions that teachers ask, the amount and type of talking that teachers do, the type of feedback that teachers give, and the speech modifications teachers make when talking to their students. This study focuses on communication skills. Within the contexts of qualitative and second language classroom research described above, this study adopts an interpretive approach, since the aim is to come "to grips with how reality is seen through the teachers' eyes; how the teachers construe reality, view their world and make sense of it" (Blaikie, 1995, p.36). The interpretive researcher begins with the individual and attempts to make sense of the individual's interpretations of the world around him or her.

The main data collection method employed in this study is observations. Classroom observational data are collected at two Malaysian secondary schools situated in Kedah and Perlis. Two teachers gave their "consent" to be observed in their classroom teachings that are conducted in the present study because the researcher has obtained the permission from those in authority to do so. A series of non-participant observations were carried out in 2011. The non-participant observations were focused on the teachers' use of communication skills such as abilities to initiate, maintain and facilitate discussion, their willingness to respond to questions and ask questions themselves. In this study, the teachers' communications skills were the focus of the research. Therefore, the data from the observed lessons were analysed to identify what communication skills the teachers used, based on the communication skills taxonomies suggested by Bowers (1980) and Bleach (2000). The data analysis of observation transcripts was centred on the taxonomy which was developed from two existing sets of categories: communication skills and non-verbal communication.

Findings and Discussions: Analysis of Teachers' Communication Skills:

From the analysis of classroom data and field notes transcriptions, it is deemed necessary to look

more closely at each of the teachers' actual use of communication skills in order to better understand how teachers communicate with their students. The skills were discussed according to Bygate's (2003, p.116) definition of skills as "a hierarchy of decisions and automated actions used as an integrated whole, the lower ones depending on higher ones". All the video recorded lessons were transcribed and categorized chronologically into classroom episodes. There were 10 classroom episodes within 10 weeks. Each episode involved communication between the teachers and individual students, and perhaps can be described as 'teacher-led discussion'. The following is an overview of both teachers' communication skills when teaching English lessons. Clearly, what is important to an understanding of communication is the notion of communication skills use: how Teachers *Nor* and *Lee* used their communication skills to communicate with their students and conduct the lessons. The most frequent lessons being conducted were grammar lessons. Other lessons involved reciting poems, reviewing MUET writing strategies, discussing novel and writing a composition. Both teachers used different communication skills and communication strategies when conducting the lessons. The findings have shown different English lessons had an impact on the greater use of communication skills of both teachers.

It was observed that both teachers nevertheless resorted to different types of communication skills when teaching different English lessons. For instance in teaching literature, Teacher *Nor* used language-based activities. These activities allow learners the opportunities to participate actively in the process of working out the interpretation of texts. In this way, students can test and discuss their ideas and hypotheses on other students before tackling what they consider intimidating questions from the teachers. It was found that different teachers used different approaches to literature. For example, Teacher *Nor*, used core vocabulary to talk about other words, to paraphrase and define them and to organise them in understanding the word "hysterical".

Teacher *Nor* : The word that can describe these feelings ... getting emotional ... you scream for help ... you shout ... you cry ... right? You call it? "Hysterical". (writes on board)

Student : Hysteria. (laughs.)

Teacher *Nor* : Don't those people who are in that state ... that you call "hysteria" ... do what kind of thing ...? They will cry, shout, scream, right? Beat themselves, right? Hysterical.

Teacher *Nor* used the lexical choice approach in literary texts because it would assist students to understand the narrator's presentation of truth or fact-like phenomena, confidence and certainty and the narrator's expressions of attitude and opinion through the use of adjectives and adjuncts. Teacher *Nor* also seemed to use knowledge of transitivity

approach in order to ask students to explore the style and ideas in literary texts. The following examples show the actor/agent is inaccurately or ambiguously defined.

Teacher *Nor* : What do you think of the story? Why do you think it is very interesting? Do you know the meaning of *The Lotus Eater*?

The question that could be raised is i.e what are referred to in the events, the themes and the characters and why have the readers not been told explicitly who these agents/actors are. The above example shows a lack of clarity or avoidance of explicating the circumstance, subject, cause, etc. of the above clauses. The suggestion is that these details have been avoided consciously and with a purpose. The student was lead to investigate the reasons of these acts and to speculate within reason about what had not been said.

Teacher *Nor* : "...nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade" what does that mean?

Student : Even death cannot...

Teacher *Nor*: Yah, even death... "death" here, capital "D"...The angel of death, alright? Not the death death, the angel of death death, even death cannot take away your beauty, alright

The example shows that by assigning agency to inanimate or abstract objects, the writer is able to avoid pointing to the human agents responsible for these actions. Students should be directed by the teachers to ask why and speculate logically on the actual of these processes. In terms of Teacher *Lee*'s lesson on writing, there were effective directions and explanations in ensuring that writing strategies became meaningful for students. Teacher *Lee* used explanations, directions or instructions in order to help students see the aims of a task, and supported students' contributions by defining parameters of a task. The circumstances in which these directions were given were also important as the student's inattention could sometimes lead to confusion.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Teacher *Lee* encouraged questions and clarifications on the part of the students, so that they in turn, might define the task themselves. Such instances are given below.

Teacher *Lee* : Just look at the topic sentence ... "Vandalism is a form of destructive expression of dissatisfaction." It is a definition on vandalism. Isn't it? Describing vandalism. We move on ... "committed by beings who bear a grudge or dissatisfaction against something in their lives ..." Now this part of the sentence ... what does it tell you?

In teaching guided composition, Teacher *Lee* used pictures to get students involved in the task. To prepare students for the guided composition, Teacher *Lee* went over each picture, getting students to describe the pictures and say various terms aloud, and reinforcing this with repetition and spelling. She made use of the pictures to stimulate students' interest in various terms she introduced. Each picture

was useful in helping students to see the context within which the events were taking place. In this way, the students were able to view the story in its entirety and enrich their knowledge of vocabulary related to the concept. During her lesson, Teacher *Lee* focused on the vocabulary and ideas linked to each picture that she introduced. Evidence is given in the following illustration.

Teacher *Lee* : Give me any kind of sentence about these two boys. Okay, you want number 4?

Student : (laughs.)

Teacher *Lee* : I'm now in second picture ... not the fourth one ... okay? Now, please see second picture. Okay, the second picture ... what...? Okay, we name the boy – Ahmad and Nazrin, okay? So, Ahmad and Nazrin, these two boys ... What happen to them?

The classroom data showed that Teacher *Nor* and Teacher *Lee* taught grammar items inductively, that is, they began by giving the students many examples of sentences containing the grammar items to be taught before they explained the rules to the students. With this approach, the teachers attempted to direct students' attention either consciously or subconsciously, to the formal grammar of the language while they were engaged in meaningful, communicative activities.

Both teachers also highlighted oral errors by directing students' attention to the sentence forms by which at the same time focusing on meanings. One way of doing so, the teachers repeated the students' errors with a stress or rising intonation while they were engaged in oral interaction with the teachers. By repeating and highlighting the error, the teachers had alerted the students to the error. The teachers should wait for either the students who made the error to self-correct or the other students to correct the error, failing which the teachers could provide the correct version. The extracts below illustrate this point.

Teacher *Lee*: Okay. This ... how many Ali do you have? (*points to the word "Ali"*)

Student: One.

Teacher: Okay. "the boys" mean more than one ... so ... singular noun ... will take apostrophe "s" to show possessive okay. The second one ... Whose bags are those? All right. Those are the men's bags. All right ... m-e-n ... apostrophe "s" ... all right ... "men" ... singular or plural?

Student: Singular.

Teacher: What? ... men?

Student: Plural.

Teacher: ... men ... if singular, how do you spell the word "man"?

Student: m-a-n.

Teacher *Nor*: No. 1 - Mr. and Mrs. Parker have one daughter and two sons. They have one girl and two...boys. Don't just simply say "boy".

Student: Boy

Teacher: Yes. Why do we use boys?

Students: Two, two

Another important aspect of classroom observations that is important to note is teachers' gestures while teaching. For example, Teacher *Nor*'s gestures supported what she was saying, as when she acted out movements of characters while explaining events in *The Pearl*. Teacher *Nor* also used gestures with hands, the up and down movement, while reciting "so long as man..." up and down...up and down...". Gestures used by the teachers may be reinforced, as when the teachers nod their heads as someone is speaking. Teacher *B*'s gestures might emphasise the important points as when she tapped something on a blackboard.

Teachers also used gestures to help them get across what they wanted to say, for example, Teacher *Nor* put his index finger to his lips to indicate silence. Teachers also liked to fold arms, stand still and wait until every student is quiet and attentive. It was found that both teachers liked to stand in front of the class when introducing lessons. This position signifies the influence of a teacher-centred session whereas a less dominating position, like the sides or the back of the class, invites greater student participation. For instance, Teacher *Lee* walked to the back of the class when she asked her students to write the answer on the board. Teacher movement towards a student also conveys a message of interest. Teachers are found to be walking around the class while the students were assigned to do some works and moving towards the students in case they needed help with their work. It can be said that individual student got individual attention from their teachers. This approach gives opportunity for low achievers to seek for clarification in their work.

Conclusions:

The findings indicated that the teachers communicated with the students starting with sociating, directing, giving instructions and summarizing but the most common communication skills used by the teachers in the classrooms were explaining, questioning and eliciting. Teachers in the investigated classrooms had used high preference of questioning skills. They posed questions in order to check students' understanding and promote student involvement. From the classroom observational data, it was found that the average of class time was taken up with teachers' questions and elicitation. The teachers used less communication skills of sociating skills in teaching. There were also important nonverbal communication skills used by the teachers. The following examples of nonverbal communication skills were observed in their teachings: the use of eye contact in order to get students to respond to questions they have asked and hold the attention of other students and encouraging them to listen when teaching. However, the teachers rarely made eye contact when presenting because they were reading their prepared notes. In addition,

they were unfamiliar with the topics they had to present. Teachers' facial expressions which included giving a smile of acknowledgement or agreement could be seen while teaching. Furrowing of the eyebrows to show confusion, displaying nervousness, and shyness sometimes were obvious when teaching a new topic especially in literature. This may due to the level of expertise and their content knowledge or roles they hold, when teaching. Hand movements were most often used by the teachers to explain certain concepts like trying to remember (pointing to the head), and keep quiet (pointing to the lips). Hand movements mainly accompanied verbal utterances and could be explained by way of the teachers' effort to convey meanings to their students.

It is hoped that the findings of this study in terms of the communication skills and communication strategies employed in the teaching contexts and those reported in previous research would provide better insights into the understanding of the excellent ESL teachers (Minglin Li, 2010; Hazlina, Nik Suryani & Airil Haimi, 2012). It reveals that the Malaysian English Language Curriculum, which has been designed around the CLT approach, is to some extent a divine document for guidelines, but not fully implementable by teachers in schools. It could be deduced that as a policy document, the curriculum has not functioned as it is envisioned to be in classrooms situations which explains the current problem of communication skills at higher institutions. Hence, this study may benefit those involved in the curriculum development and examination syndicate, to enhance the teaching and learning processes of communication in the second language, not only among teachers in Malaysia but also world-wide.

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