

Teacher Attitudes in the Teaching of English as a Second Language in the Independent Chinese Secondary Schools of Malaysia

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Abstract

English is a second language in Malaysia. Graduates are required to acquire a sufficient level of proficiency in the language to remain competitive in the workplace in Malaysia. Studies in second language learning show that teachers' attitudes and theories affect their teaching style and behaviour which have a direct influence on student learning. It is important that teacher attitude in language teaching be properly evaluated to assess its impact on learning.

This study will investigate the attitudes of English language teachers in selected Chinese secondary schools. Data from observations and interviews revealed that their reactions and actions in teaching, students' responses, students' English proficiency level, the size of the class and textbook(s), materials and aids used; and to identify the problems and challenges faced by these teachers, and their correlation with the three variables of teaching contact hours, student-student interactions, and classroom environment. The findings indicate that the lowest positive attitude towards English teaching falls on the 30-39 age group, irrespective of gender. TESL majors show higher positive attitudes towards English teaching than non-TESL specialist teachers. Teachers' pedagogical approach mostly falls short of student-centred learning or empowerment. Furthermore, instructions in English are sometimes conducted in Chinese. It is realised that theories are at times not to real life English lessons (syllabus-based, exam-oriented). Classroom environment and the contents and design of textbooks also affect teaching attitudes. Apart from helping to shape teaching practices and recommend learning models, the findings also provide insights on how the learning of English in ICSS. This is an issue that concerns the language English competence for global competitiveness.

Keywords: Independent Chinese Secondary Schools, English as a Second Language, teaching contact hours, student interactions, and classroom environment

Introduction

English is a second language in Malaysia and is taught as such through the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) programme. Its status as a global language and importance in international communication and regional understanding require a level of proficiency among graduates to be competitive and employable. Studies in second language learning show that teachers' attitudes and theories influence their classroom behaviour and teaching style which in turn affect students learning (Karavas-Doukas, 1996). Positive teacher attitudes towards the language would promote good classroom teaching practices which can contribute to successful learning and raise student competence.

In view of the importance of the issue of attitudes, it is necessary that teacher attitudes towards English language teaching be properly evaluated in order to assess the teaching performance and learning outcome. The focus of this research is to investigate English teaching attitudes of ESL teachers in the Malaysian context with special reference to Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (ICSS).

There are 60 ICSSs in Malaysia that are funded by the community. To remain competitive, these schools attempt to adopt a distinctive approach to education. A component of this approach is to incorporate an English education programme in its curricular structure. The abandonment of English as a medium of instruction in national schools in the 1970s offered a niche function for the ICSS to emphasis English learning as a marketable option together with the Chinese language in a dualistic instruction programme. The ICSS normally conducts 280 minutes in seven teaching periods of English language instruction per week for both junior and senior levels (Dong Zong, 2009).

Research on English teaching attitudes in ICSSs is scarce but is essential to help shape teaching practices and recommend learning models. The findings would also provide insights on how English is learned in privately run Chinese high schools, and at the same time in according with a key government concern in nurturing learners' English competence to raise global competitiveness.

Review of Current Literature

There are numerous studies on topics relating to TESL. Studies show that there is evidence of educator's misconceptions on how second language is learned (Reeves, 2006), that a scarcity of instructional factors influenced their attitudes (Mckinney, 2008), and that higher positive attitudes towards English teaching tend to be more prevalent among female ESL teachers (Gursoy, 2013). The challenges to more positive attitudes among teachers include the strict adherence to an examination-based syllabus, under-equipped classrooms, unfavourable teacher-student ratios, resource scarcity and the lack of support from school authority (Ozsevik, 2010).

In a Taiwanese study of second or foreign language teaching and learning for the period 2004 to 2009 highlights the failure of some teachers to follow international norms and adapt their

teaching to suit local socio-linguistic situations (Chen & Tsai, 2014). In Hong Kong, qualifications and number of years of teaching experience are found to have significant effect on teachers' output (Mak & Chik, 2011). Karavas-Doukas's (1996) investigation of Greek public secondary school English teachers conclude that teachers' attitude may be one of the causes of the discrepancy between prescribed theory and teaching practice.

Zhang (2011) shows that teachers believe that English teaching will be effective and meaningful through the use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Ozsevik's (2010) findings suggest that Turkish teachers were interested in change and were eager to identify with CLT. To create a conducive teaching environment, Xie (2008) suggests that instructors nurtured a caring and safe interactive milieu by forging rapport, cohesiveness and solidarity among all participants.

While high school students are mainly concerned with passing examinations by rote memory, well-designed classrooms may provide the environment to encourage reading and writing (LoCastro, 1994; Roskos, 2011). Student satisfaction in learning is also linked to the physical environment of the classroom as well as the psycho-social environment that allowed for "autonomy/independence" in learning (Liu et al., 2012). It is found that the learning environment of the classroom should favour an input-rich and "constructivist" setting inside or outside the class, to avoid teacher dominance but allowing teachers and students to be communicators (Littlewood, 1981; Kouraogo, 1993; Kamarul et al., 2009; Ebrahimi, 2015).

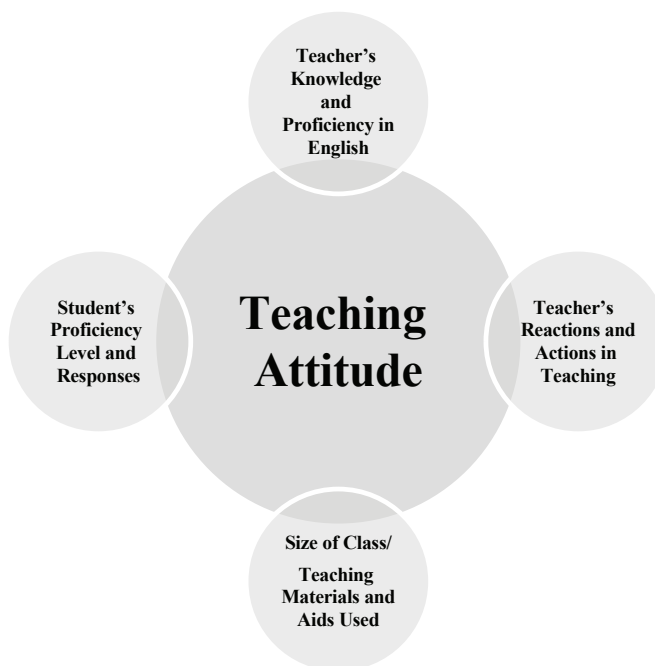
Studies on teaching materials in TESL reveal that the contents of Malaysian textbooks are culturally neutral and with minimal reference to any particular culture (Tajeddin et al., 2015). But to raise students' awareness of international culture including that of their own is a relatively common feature in today's language textbooks (Siddiqie, 2011). Textbooks with activity-centred format and knowledge-rich contents are also rated highly by teachers (Huang et al., 2011). It is believed that the type of teaching materials used in TESL will affect the teaching and learning processes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study assumes that ESL teachers' attitude correlates with a number of independent variables, namely, teacher's own knowledge and proficiency in English, teacher's reactions and actions in teaching, student's proficiency level and responses, including the size of the class and teaching materials used (Figure 1). The purpose of this study is focused on the research questions as follows:

1. How will ESL teachers' reactions and actions in teaching, students' responses, students' English proficiency level, the size of the class and textbook(s), materials and aids and their effects on the teaching attitudes of ESL teachers in ICSSs.
2. The problems and challenges faced by these and their relevance to the three variables of teacher-student contact hours, interactions among students, and the physical environment of the classroom.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of ESL Teachers' Teaching Attitude

Source: Conceptualised by author

This study is based on a qualitative approach to assess respondents' language attitudes through classroom observations and oral interviews (see Agheyisi and Fishman, 1970). The data are discussed and interpreted under the framework of Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), Larsen-Freeman's (1986) negotiation for meaning, Mehan's (1979) three-part or extended form, or adjacency pairs in instructional events, including Johnson's (1995) three-part sequence of acts (IRE).

Ten respondents from among ESL teachers teaching Senior One (tenth grade) students in five ICSS selected were selected by cluster sampling. Two teachers were selected from each school located in Johor, Melaka and Negeri Sembilan states. There were eight ICSSs in Johor, two in Negeri Sembilan and one in Melaka. The sample in the first two states consisted of two schools each, one with 1,000 students or more and the other with a smaller enrollment, while in Melaka the solitary school was an automatic choice. The sample of five schools made up 8.3% of ICSSs in the country.

The field research entailed visits to the five schools to conduct classroom observation and interviews. In each school, classroom observation was conducted in a high achieving and a low achieving class selected by the school administration and data were collected by using an Observation Guide Form (Appendix A) adapted and modified from McKay (2011). Each

teaching period lasted 35 to 40 minutes. The face-to-face interviews of the ESL teachers were conducted at the second stage of the research.

Findings and Discussion

The respondents in the sample comprises three male and seven female ESL teachers. The age of these teachers ranged from 21 to 60, of whom six were 21 to 29 years, one each in the 30s and 40s, and two were 50 and above. Eight of the teachers possessed the bachelor's degree and two were diploma or certificate holders. Five were trained in TESL or English Literature and the rest in the Arts, Sciences or the diploma. Nine out of the ten teachers had cleared English proficiency tests at the secondary school and/or other officially recognised levels. All had at least three years of experience as ESL teachers, with two exceeding ten years, while another two had also worked in England and the United States. Their ESL teaching load at the time of interview ranged from 4 to 20 hours, with eight teaching 15 to 20 hours per week, and seven of them had to teach classes of between 40 and 50 students.

Data were collected via observations covering a total of 20 teaching periods based on two periods in each of the five classes in the schools. The interviews were conducted with ten of the teachers in these schools. The data collected were focused on selected variables including teaching contact hours, interactions among students, the physical environment of the classroom and others (Table 1).

Summary of Oral Interviews

The questions asked in the interviews are, namely, English proficiency test (e.g. SPM/STPM/MCE/MUET/GRE/GMAT) taken, years of teaching experience, ever worked in an English speaking country (e.g. UK, USA, Singapore), tertiary major, problems inherent in English teaching in Malaysia, problems existing in English language classroom, syllabus and the way of teaching, use of communicative approach in classroom, attitude towards communicative approach, adaptation of communicative approach theories and methodology in English classroom, opinion on speaking activities in English classrooms, difficulties on the employment of innovative teaching, ways on how difficulties in English classroom can be overcome, reasons and components of successful English classroom.

Half of the respondents attributed the inherent problem in English teaching to learners' low proficiency of English, weak grammar knowledge, shyness, lack of interest, lack of motivation as well as the fact that '*the mastery of English is not a life and death thing in their community*' while over half of them put the blame on the design of textbooks, speaking context of the learners, family background, existing exam-based syllabus, rubrics, good grades pursuit and learners' attitude which corroborates research done by Roskos (2011).

Table 1

Teaching Attitudes of ESL Teachers according to Selected Variables

Variables	Oral Interview	Classroom Observation
Teaching Contact Hours	Yes, average	Yes, mostly
Student-student Interaction	Yes, average	Not exactly, passive
Physical Environment of Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depends on situation • Large class • Computers and projectors are installed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desks and chairs are arranged in straight rows facing the board and altar where the teacher usually stands or lingers in the course of teaching. • Number of students: 30 to 50 • Computers and projectors are installed.
Teaching Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exam-oriented • No gender bias, localised with global aspects, culturally neutral 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exam-oriented • No gender bias, localised with global aspects, culturally neutral
Syllabus and Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exam-based • Teacher-student centred • Role play • Use of PPTs and videos, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exam-based • Teacher-centred • 1 out of 10 adapts role play • 2 out of 10 use PPTs and videos
Use of Communicative Approach	In oral classes, positive attitude	Very little in grammar translation classes
Speaking Activities in English Classrooms	In oral classes, positive attitude, depends decisively on life-related topics, freer rubrics, age group and vocabulary power.	Not exactly in grammar translation classes but in oral classes
Innovative Teaching Practices	Hesitation in application, depending on level of proficiency of students	Only one teacher uses
Medium Used as Instruction	English only or English and Chinese Mandarin concurrently	Mostly Chinese Mandarin
Mehan's Three-part Adjacency Pairs/Johnson's IRE	Yes	Yes, but no further extension
Krashen's Comprehensible Input	Yes	Not exactly
Larsen-Freeman's Negotiation for Meaning	Yes	Very little

In terms of daily teaching, the problems encountered by teacher respondents were language barrier, weak foundation, unwillingness, negative attitude and the size of the class. For syllabus, two components were integrated in the teachers' teaching practices: grammar translation (structural approach) and speaking activity. The teachers taught between 5 and 28 periods each week.

Nine out of the ten respondents were convinced that the communicative approach was good and having a positive attitude towards this approach in the class. Communicative approach, if used appropriately in the long run, would help learners to acquire fluency which was believed to be of utmost importance in learners' later life though only two teachers felt it was quite hard to put it into practice probably due to learners' unwillingness to participate.

To the teachers, theories and methodology of communicative approach can be adapted only with prerequisites: small class, high proficiency level, positive attitude and not too exam-based syllabus. Again, this finding confirms with previous research (Roskos, 2011). The respondents found that learners enjoyed speaking activity in the English class but it depended decisively on life-related topics, freer rubrics, age group and vocabulary power. Eight of the respondents agreed that they were encouraged by the school administration to use communicative approach in their daily English language teachings. For innovative teaching practices, the respondents hesitated a little depending on the learners' responses. Encouragingly, all teachers thought that most difficulties faced by them in daily teaching could be overcome over time or a change of mindset.

Finally, the views on how to improve English teaching varied from created exposure to willingness to participate, the use of interest-stimulating textbooks, an increase in teaching periods, the use of good grammar books, reduced emphasis on examination-based syllabus and creating the speaking environment by force. In addition, the success of English class was believed to depend on motivation, grammar translation coupled with communicative approach, students' participation, total comprehension, enjoyment, fun and interest.

Summary of Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were recorded in an Observation Guide Form (Appendix A). The data were collected to counter check the data compiled from the interviews.

There were little interactions between students and teachers when the teacher taught English grammar by means of the chalk-and-talk approach. This was also the case with student interactions. They remained passive and responded only when called upon to do so except in classes on communicative approach by means of video clips, games, role-play, or conversations.

In comprehension lessons, the general pedagogical pattern was characterised by reading followed by questions and answers and explanations by the teacher. The grammar lesson began with a brief talk or video clip on the topic followed by questions and answers and the teacher's explanation. From the observations of the lessons, it was possible to identify Johnson's (1995) three-part sequence of acts as well as Mehan's (1979) Initiation/Response/Evaluation

(IRE) construct which corroborated Cazden's (1988) claim that "IRE (Initiation/Response/Evaluation) construct is possibly the most common pattern of classroom discourses at all grade levels." Krashen's (1985) comprehensible input and Larsen-Freeman's (1986) negotiation for meaning in group work communication were also spotted during the classroom practices when questions were posted and eventually evaluated by the teachers. In general, the pedagogical approach mostly falls short of learner-centred learning or empowerment. This setback was made worse by the use of Chinese as the medium of instruction (Khei & Noor Zainab, 2016).

As for the physical environment of the classroom, computers and projectors were installed in the classrooms in four of the five schools. The classroom settings were identical, with desks and chairs arranged in straight rows facing the whiteboard and the teacher. The size of the classes ranged from 30 to up to 50.

The class observation exercise was conducted to evaluate the extent to which "teachers' educational attitudes influence their classroom behaviour and determine their teaching style and the effects on student learning (Karavas-Doukas, 1996). The ESL teachers in the sample were found to hold positive attitudes towards English teaching which, at least in theory, would indicate a promising future for improving the proficiency of English among students. Gender was not a determinant of teaching attitude but teachers trained in TESL showed higher positive attitude towards English than non-TESL teachers.

Field data further indicated that freshly graduated and senior teachers were more positive towards English teaching than teachers in their 30s and 40s. In view of the limited number of senior teachers, one may detect a possible discontinuity in the teaching staff between the fresh and senior teachers.

Classroom observations corroborate teachers' perception of ESL teaching that theories are not always applicable to real life English lessons that were syllabus-based and examination-oriented. Apart from affective and cognitive variables, there were other internal and external factors to be considered such as adapting to suit the needs of learners and to manage the orderliness of the class. A serious defect is the reliance of some teachers on the use of Chinese in explaining the use of English grammar. The lessons tended to be teacher-centred with little interactions place between teachers and students and lacking in learner-centred learning or teaching. Furthermore, communications between teachers and students were mainly in Chinese rather than English.

In sum, factors identified for attentive participation and interactions in an English class within these schools were the use of activity-centred and knowledge-rich content textbooks, attention arousing or fun videos/clips, role-play, games, stories and teaching aids (projector, computer, cards) as well as change of teaching approach half way, exaggerating eye-catching gestures and ways of talking.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The major implications derived from the findings is that ESL teachers administered in these five ICSSs held positive attitudes towards English teaching. To make full use of this situation, it is necessary that a consensus be reached between ESL teachers and the school administration for less emphasis on examination-based syllabus and greater use of interest-provoking textbooks and aids. Teachers with positive attitudes towards English teaching may find better ways of teaching appropriate to the capability of learners while knowing that the mastery of English is not a priority among many.

The findings likewise confirmed that teachers' positive attitudes towards English would lead to positive teaching practices which could contribute to successful learning and competence. Notwithstanding the findings, the limitation of this research is the small number of informant schools. As such, the findings are not conclusively representative of the situation in all ICSSs but may only be used for general reference.

Based on the foregoing findings, a few recommendations may be put forward.

1. The physical environment of the classroom including seating, setting and other facilities and amenities installed have been observed to affect teaching and learning (Ebrahimi, 2015; Ismail et al., 2015). Both the teachers and school administration should strive to upgrade the environment that is distinctive, conducive, successful and fruitful for teaching and learning.
2. The contents as well as design of textbooks used in class affect the teaching and learning processes (Nguyen, 2011; Tajeddin et al., 2015). They not only affect learners' attitude, interest, expectations, beliefs, motivation and willingness to learn, world view and global perspectives in years to come but also teachers' teaching attitude including pedagogical approaches, behaviour and actions in teaching practices. This calls for up-to-date and balanced components which are attention arresting with localised and global elements be incorporated into ESL textbooks.
3. ESL teachers in the five sample schools held positive attitude towards English teaching as was reflected in their teaching practices. This would augur well for the nurturing of English competence in the schools. Learners should be taught to appreciate "how to learn" to "love to learn." To attain this end, teachers must seek a platform such as the Internet to share teaching materials, approaches, and ideas.
4. From classroom observations, data show English teachers use Chinese rather than English as the medium of instruction in English classes. This perhaps reflects the reality of English classes in ICSSs where English is not employed as frequently as stipulated. It is recommended that the proportional use of English as a medium of instruction be appropriate to the level of proficiency of learners. The proportion may vary from 80% or more for high achieving classes to 20% for low achieving classes.

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Appendix A

Sample of Filled Observation Guide Form

Date of Observation: Day 8 Month 8 Year 2017

Class Time: From 12.25 noon to 1.05 p.m.

Duration of Period: 40 minutes

Class Level: Form 4 OR Senior One Number of Students: 42

Gender of Teacher: Male ☐ Female ☒

Min.	TFT	SSI	Notes	PEC Notes	Textbook Used
1-2	✓	-	Waiting for class to begin	Normal	No textbook used
3	✓	-	Explanation of Objective: Direct & Indirect Questions	-	-
9	✓	-	The teacher made use of the computer and projector with questions projected on the screen	-	-
10	✓	-	The teacher was teaching with computer as aids	-	-
12	✓	✓	One student was asked to answer question. Correct answer was shown on the screen	-	-
15	✓	-	Another session on the introduction of Indirect Question	-	-
17	-	✓	Video-aided teaching	-	-
24	✓	-	Grouping for role-play	-	-
25	✓	✓	Students interacting after grouping	-	-
31	-	✓	The class was noisy but there was real interaction	-	-
35	-	✓	Students finishing their group work, with cards written with required questions	-	-
40	-	✓	Students presenting their works as a group	-	-
			The bell rang, the teacher dismissed the class		

Note:

Min = The nth Minute TFT = Teacher-fronted Time SSI = Student-student Interaction

PEC = Physical Environment of the Classroom

(Adapted and modified from McKay, 2011)

Appendix B

Interview Questions for ESL Teachers

This interview was composed of open-ended questions addressing various issues related to English teaching and language attitudes in Malaysia. The participating teachers were asked to review the questions briefly before the interview. Additional questions might be asked during the interview and the respondents might choose not to answer questions that they were not comfortable with.

Questions:

1. Could you tell me about yourself, your tertiary major and teaching experience?
2. Did you ever sit for any English proficiency test, such as SPM, STPM, MCE, MUET, or TOEFL?
3. What is the size of your class in general?
4. What are the problems there are inherent in English teaching in Malaysia?
5. What problems are there in your own teaching or classroom?
6. Could you explain your syllabus?
7. Please describe how you teach in your class. Could you give some examples?
8. How do you feel about using communicative approach in your classroom?
9. What is your attitude towards communicative approach?
10. Do you think it is possible to adapt the theories and methodology of communicative approach into an English classroom? How would you accomplish that? How feasible is communicative approach in Malaysia?
11. In your opinion, how do students like speaking activities?
12. What are some of the difficulties you have faced personally when attempting innovative teaching practices in your classroom?
13. Do you think those difficulties can be overcome? If yes, how can it be overcome and to what extent?
14. Do you have suggestions for improving English teaching at secondary level in Malaysia? If so, what are they?
15. What makes English teaching successful in your classrooms? What components do you consider essential in your classrooms? Why is that?