

Nor et al., 2018

Volume 3 Issue 3, pp. 1432-1441

Date of Publication: 5th February, 2018

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.33.14321441>

This paper can be cited as: Nor, F. M., Narodin, A. A., Rajab, A., & Hamid, S. A. (2018). *Malaysian ESL Teachers' Perceptions of the Pro-ELT Programme*. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(3), 1432-1441.

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MALAYSIAN ESL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PRO-ELT PROGRAMME

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Abstract

This article discusses the Pro-ELT programme which addresses the needs of ESL teachers in improving the quality of their teaching. The paper describes the extent of how effective the Pro-ELT programme has been, in preparing teachers of English Language in equipping them with effective teaching skills and enhancing their mastery of the language so as to increase learners' motivation to learn the English Language and consequently facilitating learners' mastery of the language. Interviews were conducted with Malaysian school teachers who have already undergone the Pro-ELT training organized by the Ministry of Education for teachers of English. The findings indicated that the training was received well by a few respondents, who found that not only had their teaching skills improved and their confidence

to teach increased, but their mastery of the language had also somewhat improved and their learners reportedly enjoyed their lessons more now that their techniques of teaching had undergone improvisations. A few recommendations were given by the teachers on how the Pro-ELT programme can be made more effective in the future.

Keywords

Pro-ELT, English Language Teaching, ESL (English as a Second Language), Training

1. Introduction

The lack of students' interest in learning English and their lack of mastery of the English Language are old issues in Malaysia but which are still very much debated among ESL instructors. The cause of these problems has always been under scrutiny and apart from pointing accusing fingers to the learners, it has always been hypothesized that ESL teachers' lack of competency could be the cause of the problem. As with other parts of the world (Tanaka, 2009, cited in Bartlett, 2017), teachers' communicative competence has been identified as one of the factors leading to ESL learners' lack of communicative competence.

Due to the awareness of this issue, one of the strategies taken by the Malaysian government to address the problem among ESL teachers was to introduce training programmes for teachers of English. One such programme is the Pro-ELT, or The Professional Up-skilling of English Language Teachers; a training programme by the British Council that is funded by the Malaysian government to help improve the teachers' English language mastery skills (<http://www.britishcouncil.my/partnerships/success-stories/malaysian-ministry-education-pro-elt>).

The Ministry has targeted five thousand teachers in Malaysian schools, both at the primary and secondary levels, to participate in the Pro-ELT programme which aims to help teachers all around Malaysia in up-skilling their mastery of the English language and also their classroom management skills. This programme which officially started on 18 November 2012 (Phoon, 2012), is conducted in two ways, i.e. via face-to-face interaction with the tutors or instructors from the British Council and also the online tutoring by the instructors.

The content of this programme caters to the linguistic needs of Malaysian teachers of English and attempts to build enthusiasm in teachers in order for them to improve themselves to help their students (Tysoe, 2013). Many Malaysian teachers are known to still carry out the traditional approach of teaching where the lessons are always teacher-centred and teachers merely going through the motions of teaching using the "chalk and talk" method. According

to Coskun (2013), the teaching quality and the ways of teaching English have not improved at all. This affects learners in that there is no motivation for them to pick up the language. Not only do the teachers need to refresh their ways of teaching, but the CPT results of English teachers confirmed that they are in dire need for more support and training programmes in order to improve their level of English proficiency (Phoon, et al, 2012).

With these observations of the challenges faced by teachers and learners of English in Malaysia, the Pro-ELT programme took off in 2012, with the first batch of teachers undergoing training in November 2012 until October 2013 and the second batch from February 2013 to December 2013. They were trained for 480 hours which included 240 hours of face-to-face mentoring and another 240 hours of online mentoring (Phoon, et al, 2012).

The feedback received from the participants who have already undergone the Pro-ELT programme were quite positive. Early results of the implementation of the Pro-ELT programme in Malaysia showed positive results in the teachers' performance in the post-APTIS assessment and there was also an increase in language capability and confidence when teaching in the classroom (Tysoe, 2013). This was a signal that the Pro-ELT has successfully assisted teachers in improving their language skills while learning new methodology to be used in an ESL classroom. The participants reported that they were now more confident of their own ability and their use of the English language skills and proficiency. Apart from the rise in confidence level, participants were also more secure about their role as ESL teachers (Clutterbuck, 2011).

Being able to participate in mentoring/training programmes such as the Pro-ELT programme, teachers are able to constructively challenge themselves through the learning of new teaching methods or adapting and adopting new teaching practices. These constructive challenges occur during the transfer of knowledge and judgement between the mentor and the participants (Clutterbuck, 2011). The mentoring act is useful as a stepping stone for the participants to get more experiences by learning through others' experiences and knowledge (Westermann, 1999). Since Pro-ELT aims at improving the English proficiency of Malaysian teachers of English, this knowledge and experience transfer is very beneficial for the teachers because they can improve and upgrade their classroom management strategies and also learn ways on how to effectively identify students' needs.

Although positive outcomes were observed and reported from the Pro-ELT programme, like many other training programmes, the Pro-ELT is not without its hiccups. One challenge faced by teachers and the trainers is the unsuccessful match-up of the mentor and mentees, (Ehrich, 1999). Being with an incompatible mentor for the whole duration of the training

programme may lead to lack of understanding between both mentor and participants. This may result in both mentor and participants acting hesitant on how to start or conduct the training sessions (Thonus, 2004). The interaction between the mentor and participants may be disrupted and this can lead to the lack of success in the training.

Due to the contradictory findings of studies done on the Pro-ELT programme that Malaysian teachers of English have embarked on, a study was conducted to collect more data on the outcomes of the Pro-ELT programme. This paper reports the findings of this study conducted on the Pro-ELT programme to determine its effectiveness in raising the standards of teaching among English Language teachers. It attempts to describe how effective this programme is and to report on its limitations, if there are any, by getting information from the teachers who have participated in the Pro-ELT programme.

2. Methodology

The respondents of this study are 8 English Language teachers who have already undergone this Pro-ELT programme since its introduction. These respondents are all female teachers with their ages ranging from forty to fifty. These teachers teach the English Language subject in a primary school where all the students' ages range from 7 to 12. The respondents selected have all attended the Pro-ELT programme which was held in one of the Ministry of Education training centres in Kota Bharu, Kelantan. All respondents were given several guide books and exercise books when they undertook the programme and those books acted as a guide for them. The main research instrument that was used to collect data for this study is interview. The interview questions are open-ended questions which enabled the respondents to fully express their feelings, perceptions and thoughts on issues related to the Pro-ELT programme which they participated in. The respondents were asked to share their views on whether the Pro-ELT programme had benefitted them, and if it did, in what ways it facilitated their professional growth as ESL teachers. The responses given by the respondents were then analysed thematically in an attempt to answer the research questions of this study.

3. Findings of the Study

3.1 Ways in which the Pro-ELT programme benefitted the Teachers

3.1.1 Facilitating the Acquisition of Effective Teaching Skills

7 out of 8 respondents (teachers) reported that the Pro-ELT programme has been a truly great help in facilitating their teaching skills. Through the responses given by the teachers, it was discovered that this programme helped in improving their four basic skills of English

along with their grammar skills. The following are some of the transcripts extracted from the respondents' interviews (the transcripts are written here verbatim, as recorded during the interviews with these teachers).

Respondent 1 [R1] remarked that when he put to practice the new teaching methods that he learned throughout the programme, his students participated actively during the activities. This was a positive sign that the programme had improved R1's teaching techniques.

[R1] 'With variety of enrichment activities, the students involved much better.'

R2 had the same experience when his learners appeared to have more engagement with the activities in class after he implemented what he learned at the training sessions. As mentioned by R2, *"I manage to attract the students' interest plus they are able to participate and follow the activity that I taught them."* He added that *"This can improve teacher in teaching skills such as Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing."*

[R3] 'This programme improves the teacher's language and teaching skills through the activities conducted by the trainer/instructor such as Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing and grammar skills.' R3 said that attending this programme had changed her views on teaching and learning English. She added that English is a foreign language and the teachers need to be always well-prepared in order to make sure that English is received well by the students.

[R3] 'I tried to implement the teaching methods while adapting and adopting those methods to suit my learners.' R3 received very positive feedback from her learners after implementing the newly-learned methods in the classroom. R3's students enjoyed her lessons more as she observed that they started to participate actively during the classroom activities.

Other respondents, R4, R5, R6 and R8 too had positive feedback to share on how the Pro-ELT programme had facilitated their knowledge on teaching skills.

Respondent 4 felt that this programme is very effective in not just improving the teachers' mastery of the language but also in providing them with the knowledge to up-skill their teaching skills.

[R4] 'This is a good programme to improve teachers' English skills by learning and experiencing new techniques to be used while teaching in the classroom.' R4 had also tried implementing the new activities that she learned with her students and from her feedback *"[R4] 'The students' level of ability that makes the chosen activities enjoyable."*, R4 was able to put the newly-acquired teaching techniques to good use and made the learning environment in the classroom more fun and lively.

[R6] *'We were involved in Speaking, Reading, Listening, Writing and grammar exercises. All the exercises will enhance teachers' knowledge.'* ... *'Besides I gain new knowledge and I am also exposed to new methods of teaching.'*

With the new teaching methods that R6 acquired, she tried to apply it with her students and the students reportedly enjoyed her lessons more.

Respondent 7 (R7) is another respondent who admitted that the Pro-ELT programme had enhanced her knowledge of teaching. This programme has helped R7 in reflecting on her teaching skills and what she lacks. By attending this programme, she said that,

[R7] *'This programme helps me to reflect on my teaching skills and also helps in improving it. I have more ideas for my language class since I learned lots of new language games.'*

The activities that R7 participated in, during the training pushed her to the realization that she had not exploited the use of more interesting activities with her learners. Undergoing the training made her realize that she seldom used games during her lessons. Thus, with these new language games that she learned in the programme, she is determined to try them with her students. [R7] *'I am going to apply the activities that I have learnt throughout the programme.'* *'I have done some of the warm-up activities (language games) and my learners really enjoyed the lesson. They are more motivated to learn English'*

R8's view of the programme is that *"This programme helps teachers in refreshing back their knowledge in grammar."* R8 shared the same sentiments as other respondents in that the Pro-ELT programme had enriched their knowledge of teaching strategies.

Although 7 out of 8 respondents had positive remarks about how the Pro-ELT programme had increased their knowledge of teaching, one of the respondents, R5 had somewhat slight reservations about the impact of the training on the implementation of new teaching techniques in her lessons. R5 found the techniques a challenge to adopt in her lessons as *"It is quite hard for the primary school pupils because sometimes it is tough for them to adapt with new techniques.'*

Thus, the interviews with the eight teachers revealed that 7 out of 8 of them had positive feedback to share about how the Pro-ELT programme had enhanced their knowledge of teaching the English Language. As perceived by Coskun (2013), by bringing English native speakers as mentors to train the non-native speaking teachers of English, these teachers will be exposed to authentic materials and teaching methods which are effective for the teaching of English to ESL learners. Hence, the Pro-ELT programme would be an effective

training programme to facilitate the acquisition of such skills for those who participate in the programme.

3.1.2 Building Confidence in Teachers' Speaking Skill

The Pro-ELT programme also helped in increasing the confidence level of the participants and also motivated them to use English more frequently both in and outside the classroom. Out of 8 respondents, 5 of them had positive remarks about this aspect of the training. This is a good indicator of how the Pro-ELT training had benefitted the participants with regard to building their confidence in using the English Language.

The following extracts revealed what the respondents felt about the Pro-ELT training in relation to this aspect.

[R3] *'In my point of view, this programme helps me to improve my speaking skill...'*

[R4] *'Help the teachers to motivate themselves to use the language confidently in the classroom.'*

[R6] *'Pro-ELT programme enhance teachers' knowledge and also raise their confidence level.' ... 'It makes me more confident to speak in front of others'.*

[R7] *'It helps me in building my confidence in speaking.'*

[R8] *'This programme helps the teachers to build up their confidence in speaking skills.'*

These extracts revealed how these teachers have now renewed their confidence in using the English Language, especially in speaking and interacting with their learners in the classroom. This increased confidence level would result in teachers' increased level of creativity in designing more interesting lessons for their learners and in giving more appropriate feedback to their learners. In general, by being confident with their own ability and potential in using the English language, the participants felt more secure about their roles in the classroom (Clutterbuck, 2011).

3.1.3 Improving Teachers' Level of English Language Proficiency

One other benefit of participating in the Pro-ELT training programme, as revealed by three out of eight teachers is that attending the Pro-ELT programme had enhanced their English language proficiency.

The extracts below are the views of three Pro-ELT mentees who felt that the training had an impact on their English proficiency. (Note: the extracts are transcribed verbatim here).

[R1] *'It gives a chance for teacher to arise their proficiency in language and teaching skills.'*

[R4] 'Learn new teaching environment to improve proficiency level of the teachers.'
'Help the teachers to improve their proficiency level and also motivate themselves to use the language confidently in the classroom.'

R5 felt that the Pro-ELT programme had enriched her grammar skills, and remarked that *"It is more on grammar skills."*

Hence, by attending this programme, the teachers' language proficiency had increased and this subsequently led to a higher level of confidence in their teaching sessions in the classroom.

3.1.4 Improving Listening Skills

One other benefit of attending the Pro-ELT programme which not many had realized is that it had improved one's listening skills.

One of the 8 respondents, R3 said that during her participation in the programme, apart from having improved her speaking skills, she discovered that her listening skills had also improved. This most likely had to do with the interaction they had with their native-speaking mentors whose accent and tone would be a good source of learning for the ESL teachers themselves.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Summary and Recommendations

To sum up the findings of this study, the teachers reported that the Pro-ELT training programme had benefitted them career-wise in that it had improved their mastery of English Language and had increased their confidence in using the language. However, the respondents also claimed that the programme has several weaknesses.

Several recommendations were given by the teachers to improve the programme so as to make it more effective. These suggestions were mainly technical aspects such as ensuring that the training centers for the teachers to go to are close to where they live, so that they would not have to travel far, and that training programmes should be carried out at a time that would not be burdening for the teachers. Apart from these suggestions given by the respondents, the researchers share similar views with Bellena (2016) in that the competencies that need to be honed in teachers need to be inculcated before they join the teaching profession, or in short, during their teaching practicum.

4.2 Limitations of the Study

Although this study has its limitations in that the size of the sample is small and the data could have been more informative had the study involved a larger group of teachers, the

researchers hope that the findings reported here would be useful for those who may be directly or indirectly involved with this programme, and in particular, the Malaysian Ministry of Education. These teachers' views or perspectives on the Pro-ELT programme can be the stepping stone to improve similar training programmes for teachers, with the aim of improving the teaching skills of Malaysian teachers in order to build a better learning environment for the students.

For researchers who may be interested to carry out an extension of this study in the future, it is suggested that they include ESL teachers of schools in urban areas. Different perspectives may be elicited from such teachers as insights shed from the findings of this study had only involved ESL teachers in areas which can be considered sub-urban, hence the nature and kind of challenges that were voiced out by this specific group of respondents.

Acknowledgements

We wish to extend our deepest gratitude to the Ministry of Higher Education for the FRGS (Fundamental Research Grant Scheme) research grant that provided us with funds to conduct the "FEXMELT (Framework for Excellence among Malaysian English Language Teachers): An Instrument for Selection of Excellent Local ELT Trainers in Malaysia" research project.

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