PRO-ELT: THE UNHEARD VOICES OF ENGLISH TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the mushrooming of professional development programmes has been unstoppable and gaining its popularity in preparing teachers for the 21st century teaching and learning. In Malaysia, teachers of English are particularly among the targeted group of professionals who are believed to be in dire need of the aforementioned programmes and one of which is the Professional Up-skilling of English Teachers (Pro-ELT) programme. This stems from the fact that a massive number of Malaysian English teachers are reported to be lacking in English proficiency and thus, contributing to a rapid decline in the students’ command of English. Nevertheless, the implementation of professional development programmes without the exception of Pro-ELT has persistently been argued. Thereby, this study was conducted to investigate the English teachers’ perceptions of Pro-ELT and indirectly, bring their voices to the fore which has perpetually been overlooked in many in-service teacher training programmes. The study was conducted upon 30 English secondary and primary school teachers in the state of Terengganu. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Findings illuminated that majority of the respondents viewed the Pro-ELT programme positively despite its shortcomings. Implications and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Pro-ELT, Quality of Malaysian English Teachers, In-service Teacher Training, Continuous Professional Development, Measurement and Evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has long acknowledged the indispensable role that the English language plays and as a matter of fact, it is considered the second most important language after the Malay language, the country’s official language. It goes without saying that having a good command of English is no longer an option but it is an obligation to survive and thrive in today’s fast-paced world. Without a firm grip of English, the country would lag behind and lose its competitiveness in the global arena. Since then, the government of Malaysia has remained steadfast on achieving excellence in English and making it among the top priority besides the other national agendas.

Regrettably, the erosion in the English language seems unstoppable as it has hit many developing countries, namely, Indonesia (Wati, 2011), Thailand (James, 2015), Turkey (Koru & Akesson 2011) and also wildly spread to developed nations such as Japan (Steele & Zhang, 2016) and Hong Kong (Yeung 2013). Similarly, in the local context, it is alarming to note that the English proficiency of Malaysian students are declining from time to time. It is corroborated by the English Language Standards and Quality Council (2015) under the purview of the Ministry of Education Malaysia that the mastery of English is in a chronic state. It is indeed very saddening to grapple with the fact that there is an acute deterioration in English. Ironically, English is very much seen as a foreign language for many segments of society in Malaysia (Iber, 2016; Yunus & Sukri, 2017) even though a wide array of language-based initiatives have been put in place. Moreover, the rate of unemployment afflicting a massive number of university graduates is on the rise (Shanmugam, 2017). Among the most prevalent criticism received is they are not well-versed in English in spite of obtaining excellent cumulative grade point of average and thus, losing the trust of their potential employers. Therefore, it suffices to say that the lack of English proficiency is intolerable and conceived as the bane of successful career upon graduation.

More devastationally, two-thirds of 70,000 Malaysian English teachers are reported to be less proficient based on their performance in the Cambridge Placement Test (Jalleh, 2012). The staggering number of less-fit English teachers indirectly mirrors the severity of the aforementioned issue and must be redressed carefully and instantaneously. This is
because the quality of English that students have is contributed by their English teachers who, in some cases, turn out to be the only language models accessible to them (Shisahavan & Sadegi, 2009). In other words, it is imperative for teachers of English to be highly proficient so as to produce students who are competent in English. It is unarguable that linguistically proficient English teachers are the lynchpin of the English education system and because of that, effective intervention should be made to keep their proficiency intact and relevant to the growing needs of the 21st century learners.

Realising the rapid decline in English proficiency among English teachers, numerous measures have been made to overcome such pressing issue. One of the most common measures undertaken is by means of in-service teacher training or continuous professional development programmes. It is done in the belief that the concerned teachers can acquire or hone skills they are lacking of and eventually, they have what it takes to be proficient transmitters of English. However, it is important to bear in mind that the success of in-service teacher training is not often guaranteed even though it consumes a lot of money, energy and effort. Thus, it is paramount for the stakeholders to ensure it is worth spent.

In 2013, the Ministry of Education Malaysia in collaboration with the British Council Malaysia implemented the Pro-ELT programme which is projected at improving the English teachers’ language proficiency. Even though the said programme has been in existence for more than 3 years and the only major nationwide initiatives ever made to rectify the shrinking level of English proficiency among English teachers since 1970s, little studies have been attempted to investigate Pro-ELT especially from the perspectives of its participants. This matter is undeniably of paramount importance as it could cast light on the effectiveness of the programme imposed on them. In fact, their viewpoints should be taken seriously (Kaya & Altuk 2012) as they are not only directly involved with the teaching orchestration to language learners (Moradkhani et al., 2013) but also the foremost implementers of change in materializing the second shift articulated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) which is to produce learners who are not only proficient in the Malay language but also in the English language.

As mentioned previously, despite a strong reverence for in-service training, a number of studies reported otherwise and resulted in a varying degree of success. In consequence, this is the clarion call for the implementation of the Pro-ELT programme to be revisited by empowering the voices of the Pro-ELT participants; one of the most significant matters that has been overlooked in most in-service training generally or foreign language teacher education programmes specifically (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011; Loh & Liew, 2016; Wyatt & Ager, 2016) especially in the soft sciences taking place in Asian contexts (Cheung, 2013). Taking cognizance of the above deliberations, it gave an impetus for the researchers to investigate the Pro-ELT participants’ perceptions of the Pro-ELT programme in improving their language proficiency. Interestingly, unlike other past studies, this study attempted to unearth the perceptions of the Pro-ELT programme from the viewpoints of English teacher in Terengganu where “16% of its schools are performing below 85% of the English literacy rate” ( Azman 2016) which lucidly defied the aspiration of providing top-notch education as enshrined in one of the sustainable development goals (The United Nations, 2016). Hence, it is vital to unveil their perceptions about the programme which they are expected to benefit from and in the long run, profit the students who are predominantly deficient in English.

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**
The study was undertaken to investigate the English teachers’ perceptions of the Pro-ELT programme.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**
To answer the research objective, the following research question was formulated.

a) What are the English teachers’ perceptions of the Pro-ELT programme?

**REVIEW OF LITERATURE**
The literature review illuminates the implementation of the Pro-ELT programme in greater details and how it contributes to the improvement in the quality of English teachers in general and their language proficiency in particular. This is followed by discussions on the importance of language proficiency and studies on the implementation of in-service and language-based programmes in Malaysia and abroad.

**Importance of Language Proficiency**
In practice, language proficiency which is often neglected in English language teaching can be divided into 3 levels which are elementary, intermediate and advanced (Harsch, 2016). Invariably, good English teachers are armed with an advanced level of language proficiency. This is pivotal to teach English which includes its sentence structure, pronunciation, vocabulary in an effective manner and, to some extent, impacts the students’ performance and gains
Rahman, 2013). Moreover, Krashen (1982) posited that language learners are in need of comprehensible input to progress and support their language needs. To enable them to make progress, it necessitates the teachers to have a high proficiency level in the target language. In a study by Richards et al (2013) which utilised data from a study documented in Harvey et al. (2009), it pointed out that teachers of low-level target language proficiency could still deliver effective language teaching. Yet, the teachers are urged to attain an advanced proficiency level so that the learners are provided with rich language input, allowing them to take their English to the next level.

In examining the predispositions of quality Malaysian English language teachers, having a commendable level of English proficiency is highly sought after. One of the sub-strategies under enhancing language teachers of quality is teachers teaching English must be English-optionists. Nonetheless, quite a number of Malaysian English teachers are not English optioned (Kepol et al., 2017) and this would affect the quality of English teaching and learning immensely. In an effort not to compromise on the issue of teacher quality, all the identified English teachers regardless of their qualifications or areas of specifications are required to participate in designated professional development programmes which amongst them encompasses the Pro-ELT programme. As documented by Krugel &Fourie (2014), the initiative to solidify the English teachers’ language proficiency should receive much attention. In reality, many of them have been the victims of vicious cycle developed in the education system resulting in detestable level of English proficiency. With them entrusted to impart the knowledge of English at present, this has become of greater concern. In addition, to leave a lasting impact on the competency of English teachers, the mentioned programme should be proceeded by some follow-up strategies that have frequently been of little concern and rarely investigated (Nicolaidis & Mattheoudakis, 2008; Njagi et al., 2014; Al-Asmari, 2016). With the present study being conducted, it was a form of follow-up mechanism which served as points of checks and balances in an endeavor of accomplishing the desired goal of the Pro-ELT programme as envisaged.

Overview of The Pro-ELT Programme
The primary goal of the Pro-ELT programme is to improve the English teachers’ language proficiency (Eshtehardi, 2014). Before enrolling in the Pro-ELT programme, all the English teachers in Malaysia have to sit for the Cambridge Placement Test which acts as the first filter on the selection of the Pro-ELT participants. However, if they fail to achieve at least C1, the required level of English proficiency equivalent to a capable or expert user of English as set by the Education Ministry of Malaysia, they have to sit for the APTIS test. Unless they achieve the targeted level, it is an obligation for them to join the Pro-ELT programme. The modus operandi of the Pro-ELT programme is based on a blendend learning approach which covers 240 hours of face to face classroom training and 240 hours of online learning. In tandem with the ultimate goal of the Pro-ELT programme, the selected English teachers or rather known as Pro-ELT participants are exposed to four language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) in addition to grammar and vocabulary. By the end of the programme, it is expected of them to reach a minimum level of C1 besides enriching their repertoire of linguistic skills which in turn allow them to function effectively in the English language classrooms. Throughout the one-year Pro-ELT programme, their learning of English will be facilitated by trainer(s) of the British Council Malaysia.

Perceptions of In-Service Courses and Language-Based Education Programmes in International Setting
Richards et al (2013) are of opinion that professional development programmes should place a strong emphasis on harnessing teachers’ language proficiency. Additionally, the goal of developing the ideal level of language proficiency that teachers must be equipped with should be pursued even after the programmes have ended. This is simply because proficient English teachers would maximise the language lessons to the fullest which would later leave a profound impact on the language growth of their students.

Nicolaidis and Mattheoudakis (2008) undertook a study on exploring the long-term effectiveness of in-service English teacher training in Greece a year after the 60-hour courses had come to an end. Based on the findings obtained from 21 respondents, the training has benefitted them in terms of their acquisition in four language skills. Reading skills appeared as the most dominant new knowledge and ideas gained from the training as voted by 13 respondents in comparison to other language skills. This shows that the significance of linguistic skills should not be undermined in any circumstance as they are valued by the English teachers who wish to improve their professional development. In reference to Wyatt and Ager (2016), such individuals very often react favourably to professional development as it broadens their horizons aside from allowing them to move forward in the age of information and technology (Hismanoglu, 2010).
Looking at the perspective of college students in Kuwait who were believed to be deprived of English proficiency, the English programme that they went for was found to be effective on the whole (Aldaihani, et al., 2015). Arriving at a similar result found in Nicolaidis and Mattheoudakis (2008) with reading being the most improved skill with the overall percentage of 70.90, majority of them asserted that their overall mastery of the English skills improved a great deal. It is also worth mentioning that the programme did suffer from deficiency. The programme was imbalanced with reading being the top priority and henceforth, giving lesser attention and focus on the other equally important linguistic craft. In other words, striking a balance in all the skills should be at the heart of language-based programmes to achieve ultimate outcomes as envisioned.

In relation to that, an investigation into how foreign language teachers maintained their proficiency by Valmori & Costa (2016) yielded similar outcomes. It was found that teachers’ engagement with any form of professional development activities is often linked to the resultant increase in their language proficiency. Not only did they feel they should become role models for their students, they felt more confident with a better grasp of language proficiency. Likewise, Ortactep & Akayel (2015) postulated the level of self-efficacy of Turkish English teachers was enhanced as a result of their participation in an in-service teacher education programme. Thereby, it can be surmised that the professional confidence of non-native English teachers is brought about by laudable language proficiency.

On the other hand, participants in Khattak & Abbasi (2010) did not reap much benefit from in-service training courses. It was because of the unavailability of the resources that they failed to demonstrate productive changes expected of them. Likewise, the results drawn from the study of Wati (2011) on the effectiveness of Indonesian English teachers training programme were not favourable. Even though 81.8% of the respondents claimed that the training improved their English speaking skills, their overall proficiency was still relatively low. This stems from the lack of opportunities to practise their English which is in synchronous with the data gathered in Krugel & Faurie (2014). Furthermore, provided that the training is extended for a longer period of time, it would be of little avail in transforming the respondents into effective English teachers. The same belief was also evident in Njagi et. al (2014) in which the training should be prolonged and sustained continuously so that teachers have a great deal of time to hone their skills. Verily, professional development should not be mistaken for a mere event but a laborious process indeed. In support of Wati’s findings, respondents involved in the study by Ghasemboland & Hashim (2013) who also learned English as a foreign language (EFL) similar to Wati’s subjects demonstrated lower proficiency in listening and speaking skills as they had virtually no chances to use English in everyday life. These imply that a strong support system in the form of supportive English-speaking environment should be present either during and more importantly beyond the training. Only then, can they keep their newly acquired linguistic skills or English proficiency as a whole intact.

In the same vein, Coskun (2013) agreed that the least focused skills in an English language teaching programme are listening and speaking even though there is an agreement on sufficient emphasis being placed on the other language skills. This state of affairs is exacerbated by unsuitable speaking and listening materials as 78.5% of the respondents perceived them as not sufficient and 22.1% completely insufficient. The absence of academic content and the inclusion of English as a Second Language (ESL) are among the contributing factors to the ineffectiveness of the programme. In response to the study by Coskun (2013), majority of the respondents were not confident and apprehensive about their English speaking skills (Abali, 2013). Owing to that, speaking skills have topped the list of the English language teachers’ professional development needs. Again, all of these studies have come to a consensus that catering to teachers’ needs is of great significance as highly effective in-service training programmes are grounded and responsive to the needs of the teachers. Another crucial matter to be noted is that the enhancement of speaking skills should be increasingly emphasized on the in-service training alongside the other underdeveloped language skills.

No matter how carefully the programme is designed, it has seldom been free from any loopholes or shortcomings. As evidenced in the study of Widodo and Riandi (2013), dual-mode teacher professional development which bears resemblance to the present study neglected the voices of the teachers. Thus, the intended programme did not achieve its objective as proven by discouragingly low level of teachers’ participation in the online session. One of the impediments was because of administrative tasks they were entrusted with. It comes as no surprise as most top-down favoured professional development programmes rarely take an effort to consult teachers and design programmes that suit their needs. In return, in lieu of being the subjects of the programme, they are treated as the outsiders of the programme who have neither power nor influence in getting their voices heard and needs duly acknowledged. At the same time, it triggers no sense of ownership towards meeting national standards for the increasing professionalisation.
of quality teacher (Hilton et al., 2013) and thus, crippling the whole educational system. Ideally, they should be compelled to take the helm of change mandated on them and to later pave the way for lasting educational change (Yavuz & Topkaya, 2013).

This can further be explained in the study of Gokmenoglu & Clark (2015) focusing on teachers’ evaluation of professional development in support of national reforms. Akin to the undertaking study which deals with the mandatory in-service teacher training programme, it showed that teachers displayed moderate gratification with the professional development dictated on them. In view of that, such initiatives have yet to come to fruition. The failure to raise the level of teachers’ satisfaction and more urgently the standard of in-service training programmes is the result of undermining the power of teachers’ viewpoints and judgements about the matter at hand. Paradoxically, the study disregarded the use of qualitative data in gaining a deeper understanding of the issue studied.

Griffiths (2014) argued that excessive workload in addition to normal class load puts the pressure for the teachers to undergo continuing professional development. The issue on professional accountability was among the biggest concern with the mean of 4.1 and it can be seen clearly when some respondents in her study complained about playing dual roles instead of attending to their core business which was teaching. Therefore, this calls for the policy maker to have a deeper understanding of what teachers have been through as the pressure at workplace could negatively impact the effectiveness of professional development programmes.

Echoing the same sentiment expressed by Griffiths (2014), a study by Herdeiro and Silva (2013) also revealed that the intensification of teachers’ work is among the factors hampering the quality of teaching and professional development. In detail, programmes that are aimed at optimising the competency of teachers are rather seen as a burden which leaves them limited time to be spent on preparing their lessons and even for themselves. Commitment to programmes that are yet to benefit them would bring about disastrous effects on their emotion and thus, jeopardizing the whole teaching and learning process.

On a parallel note, respondents in a study of Tan et. al., (2015) admitted that professional development engenders a dilemma within the teachers themselves. Since such programme is not mandatory for the teachers in Singapore to attend, they often have ambivalent feelings about it. They rather believe that their absence in classroom would negatively influence students’ learning even though the proof for such claim is inconclusive. In spite of that, all of them perceived the ideas about teacher professional development positively, Among the motivations behind their engagement in teacher professional development are fulfilling their professional accountability and keeping themselves passionate in teaching.

Roping in respondents in a geographical location similar to Tan et. al., (2015), the gamut of information derived from a study by Cheung (2013) further convinces that mandatory vis-à-vis voluntary participation can determine the effectiveness of in-service professional development course. Primarily driven by the quantitative design of the research, it was unearthed that the course is a success because teachers are willing to take all the pains and troubles to stay committed to the course in the midst of their packed schedules and escalating workload at school. Besides, the perceptions they hold about the course played an important role in rejuvenating and renewing their interests in the course. It is clear from the study that they are glued to the course because of its immense potential benefitting themselves and students in the long term.

Lima (2001) and Pawlak (2011) implied that in-service teacher training programmes must prioritise the improvement on the language command as it the basis of professional confidence of non-native English teachers. Such programmes are urgently needed as many teacher-training programmes are unable to improve the communicative command of the English language. It is also noteworthy to point out that non-native English teachers are reported to be concerned with improving their own command of the language. But what matters is that more concerted efforts should be put into achieving better language proficiency which is the most significant component of language knowledge and should be incorporated into in-service teacher training programmes. Otherwise, teachers would not see themselves improve their English as their needs and wishes are denied. In respect to that, Giraldo (2014) and Ozbilgin & Karaman (2016) cautioned that teachers’ needs, interests, skills, and experiences have to be taken into account for the programmes to yield positive results.
The Malaysian Scene

Being aware of the fact that not many studies done to evaluate the success of the programme, this propelled Ali et al. (2014) to examine to what extent Finishing School Programmes (FSP) were effective in enhancing the graduates’ employability. Unfortunately, proficiency in English which was one of the biggest concerns behind the execution of FSP remained the lowest improvement made among the other soft skills. More worryingly, in the context of this study, the preponderance of poor English learners deserve to be of national concern as their low level of English proficiency mars their livelihood in the long run. Even more worryingly, in the context of this study, the preponderance of poor English learners deserve to be of national concern as their low level of English proficiency mars their livelihood in the long run. Even at tertiary level, they are incessantly struggling to ace their English and this malady as pointed out in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013-2025) cited in Iber (2016) is in connection with the quality of English teachers. This further reiterates the fact the English teachers’ language proficiency shall never be forsaken in any ways or means. Furthermore, with the Pro-ELT programme in place, the skyrocketing pressure has been felt more than ever that its quality and standard should be painstakingly researched as studies conducted on it are very scant and not worth the enormous amount of allocations invested in professional development.

Eshtehardi (2014) carried out a study which investigated the needs of Pro-ELT participants comprising of four groups of primary and secondary school teachers. It was found that the objective of the Pro-ELT programme was aligned with the respondents’ needs and wants which ranked language proficiency as their top priority and interest proceeded by teaching methodology, language awareness and theories of language learning or teaching. Some of them even highlighted the fact that they were last exposed to formal learning of English when they were at school. Therefore, it can be deduced that their experience and exposure to English is insufficient. Albeit its attempt to unravel the needs of the participants, it gave no regard for the time-lag which should be considered when assessing the programme (Royle 2009).

Kaur (2015) conducted a qualitative study on the Pro-ELT programme which involved 15 respondents. One of the objectives of the study was to investigate on how the Pro-ELT participants perceived the programme which they attended involuntarily. Based on the responses obtained from the eailed interview questions, most of the participants were receptive to the Pro-ELT programme. However, the programme was criticized for being too exam-oriented and thus, failing to meet their expectations. Besides, the study conducted did not further elucidate on how the programme upgraded the English teachers’ language skills expedient for becoming effective English teachers.

In light of all the above studies done locally and internationally, it warrants the study to be undertaken to cast light on the issue examined from the English teachers’ point of view. This would subsequently inform how the policy better support their professional development. Not only would the study fill the gaps on the limited research on teachers cognition, it would also point out the strengths and weaknesses of the Pro-ELT programme which must be taken into highest consideration in the hope of maximising its effectiveness and impacts on the English teachers’ language proficiency. In fact, the quality of the Pro-ELT programme should be closely monitored and its assessment should be frequently made (Altmisdort, 2016) as it epitomizes the hub of teacher excellence.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Survey was employed in this study and mainly driven by quantitative research paradigm. Since the quantitative data alone was not sufficient to investigate the issue researched, the study was also explored from the qualitative lens. As proposed by Ghiglione and Matalon (1992) cited in Herdeiro & eSilva (2013), a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches complete one another as it provides room for data obtained to be studied in greater depth.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The items in the survey questionnaire were adapted from Aldaihani et al. (2015). Basically, the questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section was designed to gain information about the profile of respondents concerning their gender, age, workplace, teaching option, English teaching experience, highest qualification relevant to English teaching, preferred language in different contexts and the language skills important to them. The latter section which was aimed at examining their perceptions of the Pro-ELT programme contained 6 items. These items were accompanied by a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). To ensure reliability of
the instrument, Cronbach’s Alpha was performed which arrived at 0.956 indicating an excellent interpretation of the reliability coefficient (George & Mallery, 2003). Meanwhile, the questions in the semi-structured interview were constructed parallel to the survey questionnaire with the aim of clarifying doubts during the survey analysis. To assure the questions were meaningfully relevant, they were also examined by two experts who have been involved the Pro-ELT programme since its inception in 2013.

RESPONDENTS

There were 30 respondents who were involved in the study. They attended the Pro-ELT programme in 2013 and 2014 respectively and were among the first two earliest Pro-ELT cohorts. They were purposively chosen because the Pro-ELT programme that they attended was based on the original implementation desired by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia. The respondents’ demographics were illustrated in detail in the result section under profile of the respondents. However, only 5 of them were interviewed on a voluntary basis to gain refined insights into the issue studied.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES & ANALYSIS

After being approved by the Educational Planning and Research Unit, Putrajaya and Terengganu State Education Department, the survey questionnaires were distributed personally to the targeted respondents. They were also briefed on how to go about it. They were given 7 days to answer the survey questionnaire considering many of them were very much occupied at the time and needed time to recall their past experience undergoing Pro-ELT. As for obtaining qualitative data, they were contacted based on their agreement to voluntarily participate in the interview stated on the last page of the survey questionnaire. In regard to quantitative data, Statistical Package Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was used to process the data obtained from the questionnaire survey. The statistical procedures involved mainly were frequency counts and descriptive analysis. On the other hand, the rich information contained in the semi-structured interview were tabulated and coded according to the items in the survey questionnaire.

RESULTS

Profile of the Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>76.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Distribution of gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 2: School locality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Distribution of age
Referring to Table 1, 76.7% of the respondents in the study were female teachers and 23.3% male teachers. This is understandable that teaching profession is ubiquitously dominated by female teachers (The Education Ministry of Malaysia, 2017). More than half of the respondents rendered their teaching service at primary schools and 40% of them at secondary schools as indicated in Table 2. Table 3 shows the age of the respondents ranging from 29 to 57 years old. But, most respondents belonged to the “31-40” age category with the percentage of 43.3. The diverse range of age was translated into their wide distribution of English teaching experience with the minimum of 3 years and maximum 36 years as depicted in Table 4. Besides, more than 80% of the respondents were English-optioned teachers in reference to Table 5 but as shown in Table 6, only half of them earned a bachelor’s degree which was their highest qualification in teaching English.
As displayed in Table 9, it is an indisputable fact that majority of the respondents (66.7%) used mixed languages when interacting with students since the first and second primary language of nearly all respondents are the Malay and English languages with respect to Tables 7 and 8. Only 6.7% used fully English to talk with their students. Meanwhile, considering the Malay language is the first language for more than 90% of respondents, it is not surprising when they were more inclined to use Malay and more Malay as the medium of communication when conversing with non-English teachers (70%), family (53.4%) and friends (60.0%). It is also interesting to discover that respondents (66.7%) mostly opted for mixed languages when interacting with the other English language teachers even though their language skills were at disposal.

As shown in Table 10, speaking and listening were considered very important skills followed by other skills in the learning of the English language. If the rating “fairly important” and “very important” were taken into account, speaking was the leading skill with the percentage of 66.7 proceeded by reading (53.3%), listening (43.4%) and writing (36.6%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contexts</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>More Malay</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>More English</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(6.7%)</td>
<td>(26.7%)</td>
<td>(66.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>English teachers</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(13.3%)</td>
<td>(20.0%)</td>
<td>(66.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-English teachers</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(30.0%)</td>
<td>(40.0%)</td>
<td>(10%)</td>
<td>(20%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(16.7%)</td>
<td>(36.7%)</td>
<td>(6.7%)</td>
<td>(3.3%)</td>
<td>(36.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(20.0%)</td>
<td>(40.0%)</td>
<td>(3.3%)</td>
<td>(6.7%)</td>
<td>(30.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Preferred medium of communication in different contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Least important</th>
<th>Less important</th>
<th>Fairly important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>5 (16.7%)</td>
<td>5 (16.7%)</td>
<td>12 (40.0%)</td>
<td>8 (26.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>11 (36.7%)</td>
<td>6 (20.0%)</td>
<td>5 (16.7%)</td>
<td>8 (26.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>3 (10.0%)</td>
<td>11 (36.7%)</td>
<td>9 (30.0%)</td>
<td>7 (23.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>11 (36.7%)</td>
<td>8 (26.7%)</td>
<td>4 (13.3%)</td>
<td>7 (23.3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: The perceived importance of language skills
The English Teachers’ Perceptions of The Pro-ELT Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pro-ELT has improved my speaking skills.</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pro-ELT has improved my listening skills.</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pro-ELT has improved my reading skills.</td>
<td>3.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pro-ELT has improved my writing skills.</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Pro-ELT has improved my command of English as a whole.</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>I am satisfied with Pro-ELT as a whole.</td>
<td>3.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: The English teachers’ perceptions of the Pro-ELT programme

The mean generated for each item was interpreted based on Embi et al (2001) which was previously used in the study by Romli & Aziz (2015). The mean score of 0-1.25 is classified as very negative response, 1.26-2.50 (negative response), 2.51-3.25 (positive response) and 3.26-4.00 (very positive response). Based on Table 11, listening was the most improved skill with the mean of 3.37 indicating a very positive response. Following listening were speaking (3.30) and reading (3.27). Likewise, the mean scores obtained were also interpreted as very positive. Nonetheless, the mean score for writing skills (3.20) was equivalent to a positive response and therefore, resulting in a positive response on the improvement in the overall command of English. More significantly, item 6 with the mean of (3.27) denoted a very positive response pertaining to satisfaction with the Pro-ELT programme.

Improvement on Speaking Skills

Following are the responses gained from the interview explaining how Pro-ELT improved the participants’ speaking skills. Most of the responses attributed their improvement in speaking skills to the supportive environment created in the programme which exposed them to the real English world. Because of that, they had ample opportunities to practise their speaking skills which included delivering messages better to specified groups of audience. As a result, it improved their level of confidence and triggered a sense of responsibility for speaking English well.

Participant A: “Improving my speaking skill is the most challenging part for me. However, I do believe that Pro-ELT has somehow improved my speaking skills as all the Pro-ELT participants, by hook or by crook, have to speak in English. I felt comfortable and gain confidence to speak in English as everyone was very supportive of one another”.

Participant B: “I do not speak English much but I believe that by joining Pro-ELT, I could deliver the messages better and I have also learned that there are different ways of conveying messages to targeted audience. Besides, it also instilled confidence in me when speaking English”.

Participant C: “ Obviously, Pro-ELT helped improve my speaking skills a lot. Furthermore, with the facilitation rendered trained by the trainer who is a native speaker of English, I was exposed to the real English world. This indirectly has made a great difference in my speaking ability in comparison to being exposed to a very limited English-speaking experience in Terengganu. Besides, Pro-ELT has compelled me to speak English as it is part and parcel of my professional accountability”.

Participant D: “I mainly agree with that. I did a lot of speaking activities with the other participants. Besides, I enjoyed interacting with my facilitators. Not only did I learn many kinds of English accents but it also improve my understanding of the messages delivered in different English accents”.

Participant E: “The participants and the trainer were supportive of my efforts to speak English. It indirectly pushed me to practise speaking English as much as I could. If I could recall, our topics of conversation went beyond the Pro-ELT programme and yet, we discussed them in English so long as messages are sent across. In the programme, we were given ample opportunities to practice English as much as possible. Furthermore,
there is nothing to be ashamed and afraid of. In fact, English is not our mother tongue. Importantly, a strong support system must be present for the participants to speak English”.

**Improvement on Listening Skills**

The following feedback underlines how Pro-ELT contributed to the participants’ listening skills. Basically, their listening skills were improved through English recordings and listening activities that they did throughout the Pro-ELT programme. Apart from increasing their acclimatization with British and other English accents, they also learned to be attentive listeners and challenged them to make their own interpretation of what they had listened to. However, the concern arose when the facilities that support the students’ listening skills are unavailable at the school.

Participant A: “Yes, it did help even though I had little difficulty understanding different accents of English. But after all, improving listening skills is not as difficult as improving other skills”.

Participant B: “Similar to reading skills, I learned to be more focused when listening. If I don’t listen well, I would not be able to capture the information relayed”.

Participant C: “It increased my familiarity with British English in addition to American English accents. It was something different”.

Participant D: “Yes it did improve my listening skills by listening to the English recordings and answering the questions that followed the listening activities. It was interesting and frankly speaking, it is a good activity to be promoted to the students. Today, a lot of schools don’t have the language laboratories as compared to the olden days. How could I support myself and my students if the learning resources are not made available?”.

Participant E: “I have to admit that I had tough times understanding messages conveyed in different English accents. In the course of Pro-ELT, I learnt to be focused and listen attentively and selectively. This is primarily because most of the time, topics of discussion are not mentioned in the beginning of the recording. Additionally, lots of listening practices did help improve my listening skills and another thing is Pro-ELT educated me to be brave to interpret ideas in my own way”.

**Improvement on Reading Skills**

Below are opinions expressed on how the participants’ reading skills were improved through the Pro-ELT programme. Firstly, they seemed to take their reading activities seriously and were involved in meaningful discussions to hone their reading skills. The activities were not confined to skimming and scanning but also analyzing and concentrating on important details. With all of the acquired reading skills, this would allow them to read fast but meaningfully and purposefully.

Participant A: “I did all the reading comprehension activities by myself and in-groups and most importantly, there was a Q and A session at the end of the reading activities. By having that, it did help me clarify my doubts and teach me to be more focused when reading”.

Participant B: “It taught me to read for a purpose and be focused when reading. The Pro-ELT programme covered more than skimming and reading. It also taught me different types of reading and it was even more fun. One more thing is that I have to admit that acquiring reading skills are very difficult because it involves deep concentration. I was glad that I joined Pro-ELT because it trained me to stay focused whilst reading”.

Participant C: “I did a lot of reading assignments and engaged myself in fruitful discussion with my peers and trainer. Surely, acquiring reading skills did really smoothen my reading process”.

Participant D: “I learnt some useful reading skills such as skimming and scanning for main ideas better, distinguishing between main and supporting ideas. All of these skills enabled me to read fast but meaningfully”.

Participant E: “I was exposed to different kinds of texts and I learned to scan and skim the reading texts better. Besides, my reading skills were enhanced with the help of group discussion and the trainer’s guidance”.

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Improvement on Writing Skills

The remarks below highlight the participants’ improvement on writing skills in the course of Pro-ELT. Similar to other language skills, activities that they did piqued their interest and importantly, helped to improve their writing skills in formal and informal contexts. Reading essays of other participants, identifying and correcting errors were among the avenues of solidifying their writing skills. On account of that, it reminded them of their past writing experiences and recalled what they had previously learned but forgotten. All of these would sharpen their skills and enable them to teach English writing more effectively.

Participant A: “I believe Pro-ELT has helped to improve my writing skills a lot. For example, after writing the essay, we were asked to read the essay and detect any mistakes made. At times, we were also required to read other participants’ essays so that we could also learn from them and give feedback about the essays. Lastly, the trainer would usually correct the essays in front of the class or write her comments on the marked essays. Prior to Pro-ELT, I was quite lazy to generate ideas for writing but after joining Pro-ELT, the writing tasks assigned were helpful as it made me easier to brainstorm the ideas and I could recall my previous writing experiences during my teacher training studies”.

Participant B: “I believe Pro-ELT has helped me to write different types of writing; informal email and formal email and systematically organize my thoughts. It also helped to reinforce the skills learned during my degree studies that I have neglected all this while”.

Participant C: “Any mistakes made would be corrected and it did help me to be aware of them when teaching writing to my students later on”.

Participant D: “It did improve writing skills in a certain way. Obviously, I had fun writing e-mails. It is something interesting to be done by my students”.

Participant E: “It helped me improve my understanding of formal and informal writing coupled with lots of writing practices”.

Satisfaction With the Overall Pro-ELT Programme.

When asked about their satisfaction with the Pro-ELT programme, 4 of them indicated yes and 1 no. However, 3 of them gave suggestions to further improve the programme in spite of their satisfaction with the programme. Among the recommendations put forth were the duration of the programme should be shortened and learning materials should be differentiated. Adding to that, priority should be given to teachers who are interested in the programme and language test should be excluded. But the demand on understanding the teachers’ workload is evidently prominent as it was highlighted twice. Besides, their participation in Pro-ELT seems to increase the importance of having better proficiency to stay relevant in the 21st century and fulfil the society’s increasing expectations of them. More significantly, it is undeniable that the Pro-ELT programme played an instrumental role in boosting the level of confidence but in order to be more impactful, all the pointed areas of loopholes or setbacks should be addressed.

Participant A: “No, I am not satisfied and it is not recommendable. Firstly, it is not ideal for the programme to be conducted in one whole year. It is very time-consuming. Secondly, I am sure all the other English teachers are very much burdened with tons of workloads at school. But after all, it is a good effort to help teachers achieve C1, the required level of proficiency set by the Ministry of Education Malaysia and should be welcomed wholeheartedly”.

Participant B: “Yes, I am satisfied with the programme and overall it is a good programme to heighten my level of language proficiency. If not, I will not be able to teach well in the 21st century. Yet, in order for the programme to be fully effective, some changes have to be made. For example, Pro-ELT must take different language abilities of participants into consideration and provide different learning materials and the length of the programme should be shortened”.

Participant C: “Yes, I am satisfied with the programme and it really helps toughen myself up in response to the expectations by the society. I sincerely recommend Pro-ELT to other English teachers who have not joined it as
they would definitively learn something from it and most importantly, build up their confidence level. Once they are confident, they can even figuratively conquer the world”.

Participant D: Those who are interested should be given a priority and the duration of the programme should be reconsidered. However, I praised the Government’s initiative to remedy teachers’ language proficiency by setting C1 as the level of language proficiency that teachers have to achieve”.

Participant E: “Exams must not be included as part of the programme to reduce the English teachers’ anxiety level and school workload should be reduced. The objective of the programme is very ideal in helping teachers accomplish C1 but the policy makers must understand the other responsibilities and stints that English teachers are tasked with”.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In juxtaposition to (Nicolaids & Mattheoudakis, 2008), the findings of this study showed that the English teachers who participated in the Pro-ELT programme made the most obvious improvement with the mean of 3.30 in listening and 3.37 in speaking which respondents of Abali (2013) had been craving for. This implicitly signifies that the programme managed to fulfil the skills that they have invariably been deprived of considering “a very limited English-speaking-experience in Terengganu” as acknowledged by one of the interviewed participants or insufficient English exposure as regarded by Eshtehardi (2014). It is also intriguing to note the fact that most of them were constantly struggling to keep their English at its best in spite of being stationed at urban schools as shown in Table 2. It seems that it is not a norm for the English language to be widely practiced as evidenced in Table 9: Preferred medium of communication in different contexts and what is more to master it even tough 83.3% of them were English optionists (Table 5) and half were Bachelor’s degree holders (Table 6). In other words, being trained to teach English professionally (Kepol et al., 2017) might be inadequate at the expense of English speaking milieu. So, through their involvement in the Pro-ELT programme which immersed themselves in an English speaking environment, the listening and speaking skills had greatly improved which in turn built up their self-efficacy, substantiating the claims made by Válmor & Costa (2016).

With the newfound confidence as predicted by Ortactepe & Akyel (2015), it made them feel better about their English proficiency as a whole which is in turn translated into a more fulfilled English teaching than before. Through this study, it has reaffirmed the fact that both speaking and listening are among the most important skills and should be incorporated into in-service teacher training to fulfil the teachers’ needs. Even if so, the Pro-ELT programme, which aims to enhance all the language skills equally, was seen to be on the right trajectory without placing excessive emphases on speaking and listening per se. With the means of reading and writing skills clinching at 3.27 and 3.20 respectively, it can be inferred that teachers who attended Pro-ELT had the luxury of valorizing those skills. As explained previously, among the cited reasons for their improvement in reading and writing during Pro-ELT are “It taught me to read for a purpose and be focused when reading”, “...enabled me to read fast but meaningfully”, “the writing tasks assigned were helpful as it made me easier to brainstorm the ideas” and “It helped me improve my understanding of formal and informal writing coupled with lots of writing practices”. Therefore, there is no doubt that Pro-ELT has achieved an equilibrium in developing all the four focused skills and thereby, giving equal chances and access to attaining quality English comprehensively which will significantly improve the students’ achievements (Rahman, 2013).

Another factor which explained the English teachers’ favourable view towards the Pro-ELT programme is the belief that they hold about professional accountability. Through all the five interviews conducted, all reacted favourably to the level of language proficiency set by the Ministry of Education as “it is a good effort to help teachers achieve C1, the required level of proficiency set by the Ministry of Education Malaysia and should be welcomed wholeheartedly”. They were of opinion that all of the English teachers must not create a fuss over such requirement. Instead, they must be driven to improve their English so that they can teach English correctly. In fact, considering the rapid changes in the landscape of English education and the escalating demands from all the stakeholders, the revelations such as “to teach well in the 21st century” and “toughen myself up in response to the expectations by the society” clearly pinpoint that the necessity to better the standard of English is inevitable and of paramount importance. Besides, they were found to be committed and have a great time attending the Pro-ELT programme in spite of being bombarded with never-ending school workloads. None of them believed that they wasted their time in the programme. Conversely, the programme was pictured as a professional platform of exchanging ideas, knowledge and experiences to teach English in the 21st century better aside from upgrading their English competency. This notion suggested that they took professional
accountability very seriously and view Pro-ELT as a treasured opportunity rather than an unbearable burden. With these predispositions as delineated by Wyatt & Ager (2016), there is a strong likelihood for them to feel empowered and leapfrog the quality of education in total as there was a sense of professional accountability within themselves (Hilton et al., 2013; Yavuz & Topkaya, 2013). Contrary to Griffiths (2014), Tan (2015) and Herdeiro & eSilva (2013), this is surprisingly a very refreshing insight into compulsory professional development programmes which have garnered mostly unfavourable perceptions and negative end-products.

Notwithstanding, the Pro-ELT programme received one major criticism worth to be discussed and pondered upon even though the mean for programme satisfaction was 3.27, implying a very positive response. Many voiced that the programme ought to understand “the other responsibilities and stints that English teachers are tasked with” as they were “very much burdened with tons of workloads at school”. In reality, to complete a 480-hour programme within 12 months certainly added a little bit of inconvenience to their already hectic teaching schedules. Not only were they expected to improve their students’ English performance, it was also hoped that they finally achieved the required level of language proficiency by the end of the course. Even though all of them were satisfied with the programme on the whole, they still felt that the duration of the course could have been considered which is in contradiction to Wati (2011) and Njagi et al. (2014). The concern expressed is understandable in which teachers nowadays are not only emotionally burdened with the increasing expectations of their work performance but also mentally challenged and thwarted by non-related teaching assignments. This is in agreement with Griffiths (2014) and Herdeiro & eSilva (2013) who reiterated that excessive pressure inflicted on teachers would render the programme ineffective and meaningless. As cautioned by Khattak & Abasi (2010) and Kaur (2015), other least mentioned criticisms such as “exams must not be included as part of the programme to reduce the English teachers’ anxiety level and school workload should be reduced” and the struggle to develop the skills “if the learning resources are not made available” must be given due thought so that the programme would not suffer from potential ramifications. Succinctly, all of these grouses have pointed to a clamour for a deeper understanding of what the teachers have been through so as to ensure the impacts of the programme are felt immensely.

**IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION**

Having investigated into the matter in depth, there are a few implications derived from the study. One of which is the existence of English-speaking environment is crucial for English teachers to function and perform expeditiously. It is utterly exasperating to realize that the English-speaking environment has failed to be created within the class or even in the English class let alone beyond the school vicinity even though a plethora of reforms have been taken to promote English. Creating an English-speaking environment proves to be an onerous mission but it is not impossible. This thus requires all the parties, not limited to the English teachers only, to show their affinity and support the use of English within the school compound at the very least. Considering the nuances of the English language, it is not possible for the English teachers alone to continuously feed the language needs of the students without getting them immersed in the English-speaking milieu strongly supported by the whole school system. Otherwise, all the efforts that have been put into during English classes throughout the whole year are endlessly fruitless. It is also important to bear in mind that having proficient English teachers is important to teach English well but in the absence of the language environment, it is insufficient to keep the students’ English intact all the time and the struggle endures as witnessed in today’s world.

The other implication is to come up with a plan in keeping the English teachers’ language proficiency at the optimal level. This should not be seen as diminishing trust in the capabilities of the English teachers. This is purposely recommended for the best interest of teachers and students. As previously described, teaching English does not only entail tackling its complicated and unpredictable rules, lexicon or syntactic structures but most importantly, creating an English-speaking environment that has been an ever present challenge adversely affecting both the English teachers and students. By enforcing re-certification of English teachers’ language proficiency, this might become a catalyst for the English teachers to always strive for reaching better proficiency which could put the deterioration in English amongst students to a halt. Besides, it has been proven that the language proficiency of the English teachers is difficult to be sustained nor maintained as it is susceptible to changes. For example, English teachers who are often dealing with low proficient learners of English might lower down their language level as a way of compensating for students’ poor English and thus, putting their proficiency in jeopardy in the long term. Moreover, this matter could be further aggravated when they have to resort to using the Malay language in teaching the English language which is totally against the principle of teaching English as a Second language. With the enforcement of the above means, this would
be a reminder for the English teachers not to be too complacent nor satisfied with the proficiency they have attained but a positive challenge for them to take up that would produce a pool of great talents in the future.

Besides, the quality of in-service programmes must be regularly kept in check. This is very important in ensuring its effectiveness which is later reflected in teachers’ performance at work. Nevertheless, many are prone to take a shortcut by examining its success commonly conducted at the end of the programme. This practice has to be stopped as it does not permit teachers enough time to evaluate the programme through their lens. Ideally, it should take place after some months or years as in the course of time, they might have put new knowledge or ideas gained during the programme to a test and know what works best for them. As a matter of fact, improvement cannot be quickly seen right at the end of the course as individuals differ in making progress and that is the reason why in-service training is often associated with the word “process” not “event”. Therefore, consideration should be given to the aspect of time to allow them to make improvement at their own pace and at the same time, become reflective practitioners of what they have undergone and how it has impacted their professional growth. Most importantly, their worldview about in-service training must be acknowledged and studied thoroughly as they can be a strong predictor of exemplary in-service training.

In encapsulation, the Government’s initiative to implement the Pro-ELT programme is timely and relevant to curb further deterioration on the English teachers’ language proficiency. However, this study has only canvassed the perceptions about the linguistic improvement made throughout the pro-ELT programme. Future studies should look into how the other contributory factors, namely, the content of the modules, the trainer’s roles, the online learning session which might possibly affect the programme. It is also advisable for the upcoming studies to recruit more Pro-ELT participants teaching at rural schools in Terengganu so as to increase a greater degree of reliability and validity of the findings obtained before making any generalization about the state of the programme.

REFERENCES


