

The Link between Teachers' English Language Proficiency and Teachers' Competence in ESL Classroom

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Abstract

This concept paper is proposed to examine the relationship between English language teachers' proficiency and teachers' competence in terms of their knowledge about the language. The researchers will also refer to teacher competence as subject-matter knowledge. In Malaysia, all English language teachers are required to achieve at least Band 5 in MUET or C1 in APTIS or CEFR Readiness Test beginning 2019. There are three aspects which would affect English language teachers' proficiency and knowledge about the language, namely curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment. This conceptual framework will be used to identify the factors affecting teachers' language proficiency and their subject-matter knowledge. The study will further identify the gaps and issues related to the previous and current programmes related to English language proficiency among teachers. The concept paper is significant as it will help policy makers to review the current initiatives related to the teaching and learning of English language in Malaysia to further improve the programmes in order to enhance English language teachers' proficiency and knowledge about the language. Based on the study, there are several ways to improve teachers' English language proficiency and subject-matter knowledge. One of it is to review the role of SISC+ to assist English language teachers to score a minimum CEFR C1 in the English language proficiency test.

Keywords: - teachers' proficiency, teacher competence, english language teachers

1 Introduction

The teaching of English language in Malaysia has undergone several reforms. This is due to the fact that English language is our second language and it is also the official language of the nation alongside the national language, Bahasa Melayu. In this era of industrialisation and globalisation, English language has become more and more important as it is the language of trade and education. We can no longer overlook the significance of the language as it has become necessary to have a good command of the language in order to compete with other countries globally. Therefore, the teaching of the English language has become one of the country's priorities in order to improve its standard internationally.

However, regardless of our country's efforts in improving the standard of English language in our education system, it seems that the quality of students' outcome has been deteriorating (Sukri et al., 2017). The same situation occurs in other parts of Asian countries as well such as Vietnam, Japan and Thailand. The deterioration of English language standard in Malaysia does not occur only to students but the teachers as well. The Cambridge Baseline (2013) exposed that only one-third out of 70 000 teachers were considered proficient after

they sat for the Cambridge Placement Test (CPT). This is alarming considering the fact teachers should be highly proficient so they can deliver the lessons effectively (Andrews, 2003).

As part of the ministry's initiative to improve the English language standard in Malaysia, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR was introduced in 2001. It is an internationally accepted standard of English language which has been adopted by the neighbouring countries including Vietnam, Japan and Thailand. Under the framework, there are six levels of descriptors ranging from A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. The descriptors entail what the learners need to achieve in order to be deemed as proficient based on each level. Compared to MUET descriptors, the CEFR focuses more on the "can do" statements instead of what they cannot do. The proficient users are classified under C1 and C2, whereas the independent users and basic users are classified under B1 and B2 and A1 and A2 respectively. As the ministry is gearing towards adopting CEFR as a standard proficiency measure in Malaysia, it enables all professions related to English language teaching and learning to use the framework as the foundation to produce any new programmes or policies.

In Malaysia, the establishment of the English

Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) had led to the integration of the framework in the education system in 2003. The Council is responsible for the formation of major shift in the education system with regards to the teaching of English Language. In addition, it plays a role in enhancing and developing language learners' proficiency in the country alongside the MOE and the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC). Azman (2016) in the study on the ESL challenges in primary school reform argued that the key item in the Blueprint is the compatibility of the education system and the CEFR with the common aim to propel our education standard to be on par with other nations globally. Therefore, the Roadmap which covers all levels of education will serve as the guideline to direct English language education in Malaysia beginning 2013 until 2025.

The English language education reform in Malaysia is reflected in the Blueprint. The Ministry began the efforts to improve English language proficiency by asking English language teachers to sit for Cambridge Placement Test (CPT) between 2012 and 2013. The initiative was established under the first wave of the Blueprint beginning 2013 until 2015. Based on the result of the Cambridge baseline study, the council began the efforts to build the capacity and came out with CEFR descriptors as well as to determine the educational standard in Malaysia. Under the second wave, the council set the CEFR standard which includes all levels of education beginning from pre-school to pre-service teacher training. Under the third wave, the implementation of CEFR would be followed by evaluation and update from the council.

The ELSQC (2015) reported that Malaysia which was once renowned for its quality English education is in dire straits. This did not come as a surprise when there was an outcry about the use of English in Mathematics and Science teaching policies around 2003. Moreover, the same thing happened in 2017 with the newly launched Dual Language Programme, which also aimed to use English as an instructional language in mathematics and science lessons (Yunus and Sukri, 2017). Both of these shortcomings were undoubtedly aligned with; inter alia, English language teachers' incapacity in honing English skills for students. This could have been prevented if English teachers were primarily competent in English. However, based on the performance in the CPT, two-thirds of the Malaysian English teachers were found to be linguistically deficient. In depth, majority of them did not achieve the minimum level of English proficiency set by the Education Ministry of Malaysia, which is at C1 (Sukri and Yunus, 2018).

Come 2019, all English language teachers in

Malaysia who scored Band 4 and below in the Malaysia University English Language Test (MUET) or B2 and below in other language proficiency tests in the previous five years are required to re-sit for MUET or CEFR Readiness Test. This is in line with the second wave of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013 – 2025 where all English language teachers are aspired to achieve at least C1 or equivalent in the English language proficiency test. It is crucial for English language teachers to be proficient in the language as they are the primary source of the target language (Kim and Elder, 2008). Therefore, this study aims to examine the scenario concerning the gaps and issues related to English language proficiency among teachers in Malaysia and identify the way forward to improve English language teachers' proficiency and competence in terms of their knowledge about the language.

1.1 Problem Statement

In an effort to elevate English language standards in Malaysia, the MOE has adopted the CEFR to align the education system with the global standard. Under the ministry's initiatives to improve English language teaching and learning in Malaysia, all English language teachers must score at least C1 in the proficiency test. Therefore, between 2012 and 2015, English language had partaken in the Cambridge Placement Test (CPT) under the MOE's order and the results reflected that a high number of English language teachers in Malaysia had not achieved the desired proficiency level which is at C1. The failure of about two-thirds of English language teachers to achieve the global proficiency standard had sparked a major concern in Malaysia. The MEB 2013 – 2025 also reported that the weakest skill was speaking. The finding was alarming considering the fact that ESL teachers are expected to be proficient to teach the target language especially in terms of speaking skill as they are the ones who would give instructions and guide students to use proper English language.

Although the majority of English language teachers have shown improvement in the MUET test conducted in 2019, the proficiency levels of the rest of 50% teachers were unknown as only 50% of English language sat for the test (Yee and Periasamy, 2019). The English language teachers' lack of proficiency may pose threats to students' learning as they are the role models of the target language. There are several issues related to the lack of proficiency among English language teachers. One of them is teachers may become dependent on teaching resources (Medgyes, 2001). For example, teachers may not be able to answer students' questions if the answers are not in the

textbook. Therefore, teachers' lack of proficiency in the English language may reflect their lack of knowledge of the target knowledge as well. According to Sukri et al. (2017), it is crucial to be proficient in English language as it helps ones to succeed in the era of globalisation.

Regardless of the efforts that had been taken by the MOE in training teachers to empower their English Language competency, shockingly there are still questions arise. The Examination Council reportedly doubted students' ability to score well in the SPM examination in 2016 as the Ministry proposed for a mandatory pass in the national examination in English Language. Among other concerns include whether English language teachers were inadequately trained or whether the Pro-ELT trainers were ineffective regardless of the large amount that had been allocated for the programme (Kok, 2015).

It was also reported that teachers' lack of proficiency in the target language might cause them to become more dependent on their first language. This may jeopardise students' learning as the use of English language in the lesson is not optimise. According to Andrews (2003), English language teachers may affect students' proficiency in the target language as they are considered as the main source of the language. This is especially prominent in the rural and far-flung areas in Malaysia where the exposure to English language is minimal or absent, hence the language is treated as a foreign language (Yunus and Sukri, 2017). Therefore, it is important for English language teachers to optimise the use of the target language in teaching and learning as it does not merely act as the language of the content but also the medium of instructions (Freeman, 2017) in order to allow students to be fully immersed in the language.

Hence, there is a need to address the issue of English language teachers' lack of proficiency and subject-matter knowledge if the country aspires to be at par internationally in terms of English language education standard. At present, teachers' proficiency levels in the target language still do not reach the international standard (The Roadmap 2015-2025). Therefore, it is necessary for relevant parties especially the MOE and ELTC to examine the current programmes in order to boost the level of proficiency and competence among English language teachers in Malaysia.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

- i. examine how English language teachers' competence (knowledge about the language) affect their proficiency levels.

- ii. suggest the way forward to improve English language proficiency and competence among English language teachers in Malaysia.

1.3 Research Questions

- i. How does English language teachers' competence (knowledge about the language) affect their proficiency levels?
- ii. What is the way forward to improve the proficiency levels and teacher competence of English language teachers in Malaysia?

1.4 Significance of The Study

This study will help policy makers to identify the gaps and issues of the current programmes regarding the efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning of English language in Malaysia particularly in terms of English language teachers' proficiency levels and their subject-matter knowledge. In addition, the study will help English language teacher education (ELTE) in Malaysia to review their curriculum and syllabus in order to produce proficient and knowledgeable English language teachers in line with the global standard. Last but not least, the study will help English language teachers to review their own proficiency levels and knowledge about the language and take appropriate actions to improve themselves to ensure a more effective teaching and learning in the ESL classroom.

2. Literature Review

English language teacher competence and proficiency in the target language are closely interrelated. Their competence in the target language includes aspects such as teaching skills, knowledge about the language and their ability to use the target language to teach (Richards, 2017). Richards further explained that teachers' English language proficiency may affect their teaching skill in using the language to teach the subject.

The researchers have identified three factors which influence teachers' subject-matter knowledge and proficiency in English language which are curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment which are outlined in the MEB 2013 - 2025. The conceptual framework proposed by the researchers is as follows:

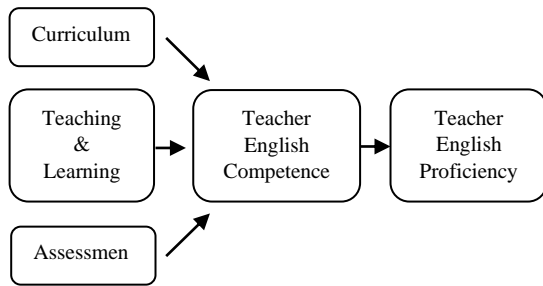


Figure 1: The proposed conceptual framework of factors affecting teacher competence (knowledge about the language) and English language proficiency

The MEB 2013 -2025 reported that Malaysia has 26 teacher education institutes or known as Institute of Teacher Education Malaysia (ITEM) and over 20 universities, both public and private offering ELTE. With various tertiary institutions providing ELTE, the curriculum between each institution also varies, thus leading to issues related to the quality of teacher competence (subject-matter knowledge) and proficiency levels of English language teachers. Although the universities adhere to the Pedagogy Standards for English Language Teaching (PSELT) which includes proficiency, they offer different aspects of principles, pedagogy as well as proficiency and structures of English language.

Another factor which influences teachers' language competence and proficiency in English language is the teaching and learning of pre-service teachers. Apart from having different curriculum, ITEMs and public universities may use different medium of instructions. The MEB 2013 – 2025 highlighted that certain subject are taught in Bahasa Melayu. This could be the reason why the majority of TESL undergraduates in Malaysia were underperforming in the APTIS test compared to their counterparts in the twinning programmes with universities abroad. It could be due to their lack of use and exposure of the target language.

To assess English language teachers' proficiency levels, they are required to sit for proficiency tests such as the CPT, APTIS and MUET. In 2020, all English language teachers are required to sit for CEFR Readiness Test. However, those who have obtained C1 in APTIS in the last five years are not required to sit for the test. The question is, how reliable does each proficiency test measure the proficiency levels of English language teachers? MUET is used as entry exam for universities' undergraduates and therefore there is lack of data on the effectiveness of the test to measure English teachers' proficiency levels (Yee and Periasamy, 2019). There are three issues which surfaced regarding the difference proficiency test use. First, each proficiency test has different format

and types of questions. For instance, participants are tested on grammar and vocabulary in APTIS test, whereas these types of questions are absent in MUET. Second, the level of difficulties between the two tests might vary due to the nature of each test. Third, APTIS test is done via computer while MUET is conducted face to face with the examiners.

2.1 Teacher Competence (Subject-Matter Knowledge)

In the teaching of a second or foreign language, teacher competence plays a significant role in determining the effectiveness of the lessons. Teacher competence is a broad term covering a few aspects such as knowledge, important skills and behaviours that support real life situations (Jalal et al., 2009). Meanwhile, Cross (2003) defines English language teacher competence as professional competences, education level, attitudes and subject competences.

For the purpose of this study, the researchers are focusing on knowledge aspect of language teachers. A language teacher should have knowledge about the target language that they are teaching (Cross, 2003), in this case, knowledge about English language. The lack of knowledge in the language may affect the success of a lesson. For instance, a study conducted by Shuib (2009) found that primary school teachers' lack of knowledge in terms of grammar may affect the students' learning negatively as most of them taught grammar to their students. Therefore, these teachers may not be able to correct their students' errors due to their lack of knowledge of the subject matter.

In relations to the teaching of English language in Malaysia, teachers should have knowledge related to the four language skills which are speaking, listening, reading and writing aside from knowledge about grammar and vocabulary. In the English language curriculum, students are expected to master all these four skills and they will be assessed based on the CEFR scales. Therefore, it is crucial for English language teachers to possess knowledge about the language so they will be able to provide good model of the language use (Richards et al., 2013).

2.2 Teachers' Language Proficiency

The definitions of teachers' language proficiency vary from one researcher to another. Le and Renandya (2017) defines it as the scores that they achieve in a language proficiency test. The international proficiency standard is currently at C1 which is based on the CEFR proficiency scales. In order to deliver effective teaching and learning of

English language in the classroom, teachers should be more proficient than students who are aspired to achieve B2 by the time they graduate from secondary schools in Malaysia. Being proficient in the target language also means that language teachers are knowledgeable in terms of the subject-matter which in this case is English language (Richards et al., 2013). Hence, in order to become a proficient user of English language, teachers must also master the knowledge about the language.

Nonetheless, Le and Renandya (2017) also mentioned that it is uncertain up to what extent language teachers should score in a proficiency test to guarantee a successful teaching and learning of language lessons due to the complex nature of language proficiency (Lantolf and Frawley, 1988). This is in agreement with Bachman and Palmer (1996) who found that language proficiency involves a few disciplines including functional knowledge, textual knowledge and grammatical knowledge, therefore making it hard to determine teachers' proficiency level. In addition, there is not enough study to support whether the language proficiency test, for example, MUET is efficient to test English language teachers proficiency levels as the original intention of the assessment is to test students' proficiency in the tertiary level of education (Yee and Periasamy, 2019).

Meanwhile, English language teachers who are proficient in the target language will be able to model the use of good language, provide appropriate explanations regarding grammatical rules and vocabulary, use the target language to give instructions and provide effective feedback to students (Richards, 2017). In other words, proficient English language teachers are able to use the language correctly and are able to teach students to use the correct form of the target language as well as helping students to correct their mistakes when necessary. If English language teachers are not proficient enough in the target language, the teaching and learning may not be effective as they are not efficient in identifying mistakes or providing useful feedback. This is exhibited by a study conducted by Richards et al. (2013) where high language proficiency in the target language helps language teachers to give instructions effectively and provide more input for students in terms of language structures and lexical knowledge compared to their less proficient counterparts. Therefore, it is crucial for English language teachers to be highly proficient as students receive input mostly from them (Kim and Elder, 2008).

2.3 Initiatives to Improve Teacher Proficiency in Malaysia

One of effort to improve ESL teachers' proficiency in Malaysia is the establishment of the Pro-ELT programme. English language teachers who fail to achieve C1 in APTIS are required to undergo the programme in order to improve their proficiency levels. The programme which kick-started in 2013 is the brainchild of the British Council Malaysia and the MOE and it is the only initiative founded specifically to help raise the proficiency levels of English language teachers. Under this programme, English language teachers are required to attend 240 hours sessions of e-learning and another 240 hours session of face-to-face learning (Sukri et al., 2017). As its goal is to raise English language proficiency levels, teachers are coached on vocabulary and grammar aside from the four language skills which are listening, speaking, reading and writing.

In addition, the Ministry has introduced the English for Preschool Teachers (EPT) programme for preschool teachers in 2018 to enhance their English proficiency in implementing teaching and learning in English as set out in the Kurikulum Standard Pra Kebangsaan (KSBK). ELTC was assigned to work on implementing the aspirations in the roadmap 2015 -2025 those young learners need to learn from teachers who are well equipped with English (Ministry of Education 2015). When an English language test (Ujian Kecekapan Bahasa Inggeris or UKBI) was conducted in 2017 by the Teacher Education Division (TED), 9103 Preschool teachers were tested and their scores reflected many of the preschool teachers scored CEFR B and below (Thanabalan and Hassan, 2018). Therefore, EPT programme was designed to provide support to preschool teachers in mastering English proficiency. It emphasizes on English Language Proficiency which focuses on basic language awareness in which participants are given input and practice on the language. In 2017, 592 preschool teachers who obtained A1 and A2 in UKBI were trained under EPT.

3. Discussion and Implication

Effectiveness of the teaching cannot be automatically derived. They are developed in line with the quality of university teacher education program, teaching experience, interactions with senior teachers and other in-service teacher training programs (Arifani et al., 2019). Nearly all non-native English language teacher-training courses have predictable components. They normally offer a mix of language skills training such as teaching writing or speaking, and language systems such as grammar, speech, and phonology. Another component of training courses is the linguistic component which

mainly emphasizes language theories and language learning. The purpose of this portion is primarily to raise awareness among teachers about the nature of English and how it functions, rather than how to use it. Therefore, there is a need for public universities to review their teacher education curriculum to cater to the improvement of pre-service teachers' proficiency levels.

Nowadays, most teachers' training program miss the language improvement component which is consider the important part in enhancing teachers' language proficiency so that teachers can use proper English in their classroom (Eshtehard, 2014). Even though the ministry has come up with a few initiatives to raise the English education standard in Malaysia, most of the programmes are designed specifically for classroom implication with less emphasis to address English teachers' low proficiency issue. The only programme introduced to cater to this problem is the Pro-ELT. Hence, there is a need for the ministry to focus on improving English language teachers' proficiency by providing more programmes to allow teachers to increase their proficiency levels in the target language. Andrews (2001) mentioned that the success of language lessons does not depend only on the different role's teachers play but also their ability to provide feedback and input of the target language.

The importance of English language competence in academic contexts has led Malaysian universities to integrate English language competence into the admission and placement of academic programmes. Competency in English is required in Malaysian tertiary institutions as students are expected to have a quasi-native reading ability to read academic reading texts prescribed for the respective disciplines. In order to be admitted to Malaysian public universities, the Malaysian University English Exam (MUET) is currently widely used as a test for determining one's English language proficiency. MUET consolidates pre-university students' English language capacity to allow them to perform effectively at tertiary level in their academic pursuits, in line with the goals of the National Education Philosophy. The requirement to pursue Bachelor of Education (TESL) is minimum band 4. So, the entry requirement should be up to minimum band 5 because it is highly related to the academic achievement (Othman and Nordin, 2013). Therefore, the course offered to TESL graduates should focus on boosting their proficiency levels aside from instilling the knowledge on theories and pedagogies to ensure they are able to achieve minimum Band 5 or CEFR C1 by the time they graduate.

There were a few typical scenarios when

teachers attended the professional development programme. For instance, the programme might not be interactive enough as teachers merely sat and listened to the expert sharing ideas throughout the course. In addition, the programme might be too short for teachers to do practice. Besides that, the programme might not suit their professionalism. Abdullah et al. (2016) mentioned that content must suit the level of professional development of the teachers. Therefore, the idea of "one size fits all" should be avoided in the design and delivery of in-service training. A successful and effective training programme should take into consideration the objective of the programme, selection of participants, need analysis, content, duration, trainers and so on (Sukri and Yunus, 2018b). Therefore, early planning is vital. Certain standards need to be set beforehand to ensure the programme effectiveness (Rahman and Ahmad, 2015).

The incorporation of all four dominant language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing) into language programmes is imperative for language designers or policy-makers. In other words, achieving the equilibrium of the aforementioned skills must be at the core of any language reforms, rather than simply focusing on one particular skill. Kepol (2017) reaffirmed that initiatives aimed at English teachers should strive for a holistic integration of language skills so that they can work effectively in language classrooms and increase level of self-confidence for non-native English teachers in particular. English teachers' proficiency should not be conceived as a mere event but rather as continuing cycle. Teachers should continue to harness their English proficiency even after the completion of the programme to ensure the impact of the programme is maximized (Uri and Aziz, 2018). Other considerations like linguistics features should be paid closer attention rather than the language features. For example, the pronunciation appeared to be one of the most prevalent new knowledge gained from 60-hour in-service English teacher training courses in Greece (Sukri and Yunus, 2018b). It is important for ESL teachers to acquire an advanced level of English proficiency that would later help advance the English proficiency of their students and in the long run become autonomous English language learners.

The language programme must also take into consideration the cultural aspects because they are central to the learning of languages. In learning a language, ones do not only use it, but ones also need to be receptive and mindful of the culture of the target language. In the case of English language, this is of vital importance for cross-cultural communication especially nowadays as more people communicate on social media sites either in British English or American English which are the

internationally accepted means of communication (Monfared et al., 2016). In addition, Malaysia has adopted the Standard British English as "the official reference standard for English in terms of spelling, grammar and pronunciation". Tarnopolsky (2016) implied that communicative analytical approach should be culturally focused in which learners can use it in conversation linguistically and effectively in a sociocultural way.

Another obstacle to the smooth implementation of in-service training is the workload of teachers. Many teachers voiced out that with duties and stints for which English teachers are assigned, they were quite burdened for tons of school workloads. In fact, completing a 480-hour programme within 12 months would definitely add to their already hectic teaching schedules with a little bit of inconvenience. Therefore, taking grasp of their responsibilities at school is of paramount importance, which could potentially moderate or ruin the goal of the training or programmes attended. Thus, it is important to include teachers from the very first stage of developing programmes that could establish constructive dialogue between the two parties and ultimately result in a win-win decision-making situation (Konokman et al., 2017).

Pro-ELT incorporates F2F and Online elements to promote preparation for various learning styles and workloads for different teachers. It may be impossible to achieve the target of Pro-ELT if the course participants do not feel comfortable with the online aspect due to lack of online training or technical interest. At the other hand, APTIS is an online assessment and is the final examination in Pro-ELT and teachers need to feel confident to be tested using an online examination (Eshtehardi, 2014). Therefore, in order to train teachers in the English language competence, MOE also can organise ICT programme to enhance teachers' competence in utilizing ICT so that they can be more familiar and confidence in going through the Pro-ELT without any hesitation.

When arguing about the Pro-ELT, the trainers are the hot potatoes in the discussion of most teachers. As the programme is conducted under the British Council, most of the trainers are English native speakers. Hence, this has sparked a few concerns regarding the effectiveness of the programme. For instance, Sukri and Yunus (2018b) mentioned that the trainers might not understand the struggles faced by the local teachers in following their instructions during the programme. Therefore, the issue is whether it is appropriate to use native speaker trainers to coach local teachers. It is a matter of concern as the training programme may become ineffective and may not benefit English language teachers in increasing their language competency. Thus, the Ministry of

Education should take action in improving the management of the Pro-ELT programme and create more relevant up-skilling programme which suits English language teachers' need.

In shouldering the pressures and heavy obligations as a mentally, morally, emotionally, and physically healthy teacher in harmony, Jaya and Chua (2019) argued that teachers require support to help them cope with changes in policy. In order to help English teachers cope with changes in the education system, a few upgrading programmes have been established for them. Among others, the initiatives include the School Instructional Professional Coach Plus programme (SISC+). Under this programme, teachers are provided with on-site assistance which mostly focuses on their pedagogical practices. The SISC+ is also responsible to help teachers improve their competency by creating intervention programmes and coaching them whenever necessary. Presently, the roles of the SISC + is more towards the enhancement of teachers with the pedagogical development in school. MOE can improve the current SISC+ programme to focus more on empowering the English teacher competency in their English Language to help improve their proficiency levels.

4. Conclusion

In retrospect, the concept paper highlights some of the challenges faced by English language teachers in improving their language proficiency and competence. Among the challenges face by English language teachers include external factors such as pedagogical demands, administrative responsibilities as well as time restriction. As a result, teachers may not be able to undergo proper training or to look for initiatives to upgrade themselves. Therefore, this study reveals the needs for the MOE and policy makers to improve the existing professional development programmes for English language teachers in order to develop their language competence and proficiency levels. At the same time, ESL teachers also have to be proactive to seek ways to improve their professionalism by participating in online courses pertaining to their self-development especially in terms of subject-matter knowledge and proficiency as they are the frontliners of the education system. Therefore, all relevant bodies from education institutions to policy makers and the MOE need to work together to increase their English language competency and thus uphold their English language proficiency.

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