

Developing Teacher Oral Competency Framework for Secondary School Teachers: Moving Towards Meaningful Teaching of English Language

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Abstract

The secondary school English curriculum in Malaysia advocates that English could provide greater opportunities for students to improve their knowledge and skills in cross cultural settings. Additionally, they will be able to interact with students from other countries and improve their proficiency in English. Given the increasing importance of international interactions among English users from different backgrounds and the current approaches in ELT pedagogy in literature, this paper examines the oral competency skills of a group of English teachers. Data was collected in a seminar specially carried out for a group of selected English teachers. Through micro-teachings sessions, the English teachers demonstrated their use of oral communication skills in delivering the content of the subjects. This seminar was an attempt to establish the collaboration among recognised Excellent English Teachers and their colleagues to enhance their oral communication skills in classrooms. The results indicated the potential of developing an oral competency framework that could be constructed and referred to by secondary English teachers so as to enhance their effectiveness of teaching the content knowledge to their students. This oral competency framework would provide an excellent opportunity to help realise the purpose of using English as the medium of instruction as proposed within the curriculum.

Introduction

In Malaysia, there is no set of agreed upon oral competency framework for secondary school teachers. Research outside Malaysia shows that one set of competency framework does not always fit teaching specialisations (Barblett & Maloney, 2002). This study is designed to evaluate the oral competencies of secondary schools teachers in Malaysia.

The research will identify and evaluate the oral competencies in two areas, i.e. personal competencies and professional competencies for secondary school teachers. The development

of the nation depends on the quality of its education. The teacher is the most important factor in the process of education. The quality and level of excellence in education depend upon the quality and competence of the teacher.

Definition of key terms

Oral communication skills

Communication skills which contribute to effective teaching practice have been regarded as important factors in teacher education courses (Lee, 1997). Bleach (2000, p. 10) states that communication skills can be explored under two broad headings - verbal communication and nonverbal communication and the ways in which these practices are used effectively in teaching and learning. Bygate (2003, p. 116) defined skills as “a hierarchy of decisions and automated actions used as an integrated whole, the lower ones depending on higher ones”. In the context of this study, teacher talk and language is one of the verbal communication skills presented by Bleach (2000).

Therefore, communication skills in this study are regarded as the following: teacher talk and language; skills of interacting; skills of transmitting an appropriate message by presenting; explaining and discussing; checking the message has been received by questioning, prompting and clarifying; and non-verbal communication skills used by the teachers in their learning and teaching contexts and how their communication skills depend on each other.

Competence

According to Kalra (1997) competence is usually understood as quality performance. It remains an estimate unless actually demonstrated actual performance situation. The teacher’s competency will mean teacher’s power, skills, means or talent to perform his functions satisfactorily as a teacher. Teacher competence differs from “teacher performance” and “teacher effectiveness”. Teacher competence infact, is a stable characteristic of the teacher that does not change applicably when teacher moves from one situation to another.

Literature review

Secondary education in Malaysia

The role of English in the Malaysian education system underlies some issues with regard to the teaching of English and Mathematics in English at secondary schools. The central focus of the Secondary School English Language Program and Mathematics in *Kurikulum Baru*

Sekolah Menengah (New Secondary School Integrated Curriculum (NSSIC) is the development of the four language skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking. In fact, it is stipulated in the curriculum specifications that teaching is to emphasize oracy (listening and speaking), literacy (reading and writing) skills and numeracy.

The current curriculum, NSSIC is based on the National Education Philosophy. The objective is to create a wholesome individual with high moral values. The introduction of the NSSIC curriculum into Malaysian secondary schools has brought changes to the roles of teachers and students in the traditional classroom. For the teacher, the NSSIC requires a shift away from the traditional strategies of teacher-dominated and teacher-directed classes. Teachers are encouraged to develop a strategy of encouraging learners to take a more active role in their own learning. In addition, the curriculum provides opportunity to students to develop their talent in certain vocations. The main focus of the curriculum is on an integrated educational approach. The approach incorporates knowledge with skills and moral values. It also combines theory with practical training, curriculum with co-curriculum. Although government officials have asked teachers to begin focusing on oral communication skills in English instruction based on the communicative methodology, it is not clear whether the majority of secondary school teachers have sufficient English competency to teach English effectively or whether they even have confidence in their ability to instruct their students to speak English.

Malaysian classrooms teaching, focus upon procedural competence, thus the quality of oral communication that is actually taking place within Malaysian classrooms should be of great concern especially if the teachers who are teaching English are themselves not competent in English. The assumption is that students could learn both the language and the content with appropriate instructional supports. Clearly, we need to identify some of those instructional supports and the development of an appropriate oral competency framework will help serve the purpose, that is, through the creation of meaningful oral communication skills standards for meaningful; teaching and learning of English language. Moreover, research shows that culturally and linguistically sensitive learning environments are essential for success in mathematics and that teacher's speech is important in cultivating these environments; and to create such environments, we must integrate principles of effective instructions for foreign-language learners (Khisty, 2002).

Research in teacher education

Internationally, it is evident that large numbers of ESL teachers in secondary schools require further professional development to improve their oral communication skills (Johnson, 1995). Current views of professional development generally position teachers as active participants who work democratically in learning communities to address issues surrounding their work. A major goal is to build understanding that is immediately relevant to teachers' professional practice, drawing on what they have learned from various sources (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Lieberman & Miller, 2001).

A recent Malaysian government document entitled *Education Development Master Plan 2006-2010*, which was launched in 2006, identified the importance of developing professionalism among teachers in primary and secondary schools as one of the six strategies stated. In this regard, *Vision 2020* also emphasizes teacher training where the teachers have to become researchers as well as reflective practitioners. By 2020, both educators and student teachers should develop higher order intellectual capacities which allow them to critique their experiences and think reflectively about the teaching knowledge base. One of the key components of both documents is the urgent need for teacher education.

The development of their communication skills would certainly very much depend on how their teachers orally communicated with them when teaching the content of the lessons. In other words, to enhance academic success, teachers need to provide meaningful, content-area instruction presented in a framework of appropriate language development skills. As teachers are responsible to provide students with instruction that simultaneously develops students' foreign (English) language skills and content-area knowledge (Ovando & Collier, 1998), an oral competency framework could provide an important guide for the teachers to identify and implement the important linguistic concepts, especially within the domain of oral competencies, in order to provide students with comprehensible input that is (slightly) above the students' level of understanding. Note, that in the classroom, the most important model of academic language and its meanings is the teacher (Khisty, 2002).

The transformation of Malaysia's education system seeks both to fulfil *Vision 2020*, which calls for a technologically literate, critically thinking work force prepared to participate fully in the global economy of the 21st century and to confirm to Malaysia's *National Philosophy of Education*. Teachers must be able to keep up with the rapid expansion of knowledge. This

is where language plays its role, because all knowledge including new knowledge is gathered, developed and disseminated through language. This is because language cuts across all fields of knowledge (Lee, 1997). Therefore, a positive and pro-active action is being taken by the Teacher Education Division to train teachers with the knowledge of the English language and Mathematics, i.e. the Oral Competency Framework for the secondary school teachers.

Research in teacher competency

According to Kalra (1997) competence is usually understood as quality performance. It is not in the form of single and direct acts such as particular attitudes, habits or specific knowledge. It is in the form of summation of some behaviours as clustered activities. In addition, competence is a dynamic pattern of performance. It remains an estimate unless actually demonstrated actual performance situation. The teacher's competency will mean teacher's power, skills, means or talent to perform his functions satisfactorily as a teacher. Teacher competence differs from "teacher performance" and "teacher effectiveness". Teacher competence in fact, is a stable characteristic of the teacher that does not change applicably when teacher moves from one situation to another.

A teacher's communicative competence as the goal of communicative language teaching in the classroom is crucial in stimulating and regulating the learning activities of students (Savignon, 2001). Oral communicative instruction needs to be maximized when teachers actively engage students in learning, use effective questioning and discussion techniques that enhance students' participation, provide feedback on students' progress, utilize effective teaching techniques, and communicate with clarity and accuracy (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2004). However, there has been little emphasis in teaching preparation programs on preparing teachers to use oral communication effectively for teaching and learning activities (Hiramatsu, 2005). There is a need for research focusing on the degree to which teachers' oral communication skills as demonstrated in the context of their teaching situations.

The need for teacher competency arises because the competent teacher possesses the ability to provide for and personally utilize more positive reinforcement and the elimination of tension within the classroom and to facilitate the development of more positive feeling within the children. The ability to provide increased opportunities for children is to present unsolicited facts, information and opinions during classroom teachings. At the international level, the debate concerning teaching standards has been intense and resulted in the emergence of a

plethora of teaching standards frameworks. In some states in Australia, such as Western Australia and Queensland, documents have been produced which outline the generic teaching competencies for all teachers (Barblett & Maloney, 2002). Barblett and Maloney (2002) also argue that teaching standards across the world have shown to increase teacher effectiveness and influence positive outcomes for students. Standards guide teachers how to become better at what they do so that learning takes place not only for students but for teachers as well.

It seems timely that within Malaysia, there ought to be a framework which identifies key elements of effective teaching practice for English competent teachers to teach English. As pointed out by Ingvarson (1998), a professional body is defenceless without standards and a demonstrated ability to articulate standards for high quality practice is an essential credential if a professional body is to be taken seriously by the public and policy makers.

Primary aim of study

The overall aim of the study is to develop a teachers' oral competency framework for Malaysian secondary school teachers with the focus on the teaching of English.

Research objectives

A significant number of objectives in this study will be achieved from the following:

- To explore oral communications skills in the teaching of English.
- To determine oral competencies required by secondary school teachers involved in the Malaysian education system.
- To make explicit the oral communication skills of English secondary school teachers.
- To investigate different aspects of teachers' oral competencies.
- To develop descriptions of teachers' oral competencies to accompany Teacher Competency Framework.
- To gather teachers' feedbacks and perspectives on the development of oral competency framework.
- To identify teachers' oral competencies that can be used for professional development and teacher training.
- To document the Teacher Oral Competency Framework in reflecting the best teaching practices that would be required of the Malaysian education system.

Research questions (RQ)

The study addressed the main research question:

What are the oral competencies required of teachers involved in teaching and learning of English language at Malaysian secondary schools?

The specific research questions are:

- Q1. What are the teachers' oral communication competencies when teaching in their secondary school classrooms?
- Q2. What oral communication competencies should the teachers acquire in the near future?
- Q3. How do teachers perceive their own oral communication skills in their teaching contexts?
- Q4. What kind of oral communication difficulties, if any, do teachers experience in teaching?
- Q5. How can the teachers use this framework to develop their oral competencies in teaching?

Methodology

Research design

This study is conceptualized within the interpretive paradigm. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) subsume interpretivism under qualitative research. Interpretivists are concerned with understanding the meanings which people give to objects, social settings, events and behaviours of others, and how these understandings in turn define the settings. In order to retain the integrity of the phenomena under study, an interpretivist approach in research and a qualitative study are needed to further provide a rich description of the Teacher Oral Competency Framework. It is a spiral process of action, collation, reflection and review, where the input of teachers will be incorporated in the development of the framework. Since this document is for teachers, it is important to have teachers' voices in the development of the framework. Therefore, data collection techniques will reflect this need. Data collection methods consist of interviews, videotaping of classroom interactions and communications, written editorial comments from experts and surveys will be used to provide the rich descriptions.

Participants

Random and purposive sampling is chosen for sampling method in this study. Purposive sampling is often used in qualitative research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), purposive sampling allows the full scope of issues to be explored. Purposive sampling can be very useful for situations where there is a need to reach a targeted sample quickly and where sampling for proportionality is not the primary concern. Participants are selected because of specific characteristics. Based on a purposive sampling procedure (Creswell, 2008), the teachers were identified using the following purposes: variations in teaching experience, professional capabilities and qualifications.

A significant number of participants in this study were drawn from the following:

1. A reference group of experts from the field locally and abroad. The local reference group consists of Adjunct Professors; Professors Emeritus; Professors of Education; Directors of Education from CDC, Teacher Division, States Education Directors. The abroad group consists of representatives from Western Australian and New Zealand Education Department and /or Queensland University of Technology.
2. Three focus groups of five English language teachers (Form 1, Form 2 and Form 4) from the northern states of Malaysia.

Data collection

The data was collected in the following phases.

Phase One: Familiarization with the professional development context and selection of participants

A reference group of experts from Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand were convened and invited to comment on the language policy and the national curriculum, and teaching and learning of English language. Document analysis and a brief literature review were conducted on topics such as Teaching Standards Framework, effective teachings of English, and initial stages of the teaching profession.

This phase enables the researcher to clarify the context of the study and to select participants for Phase Two. The main objective is to familiarise the researcher with the context of developing the framework. This phase involved an interview with the writer of the framework in Australia and non participant observation.

Phase Two: Conducting a seminar

This phase enabled the researcher to collect information from the focus groups of expert teachers on their oral communications skills in classrooms and their views on what kind of oral communication skills teachers should have and would be able to do. The teachers will be selected based on the following purposes: qualification; teaching experience; experience of teaching at secondary schools and professional development.

While the participants were watching videos on teaching, the participants were asked to observe and identify oral communication skills that were centred on the taxonomy which was developed from three existing sets of categories: oral communication skills, communication strategies, and non verbal communication. Data collected from videotaping will be transcribed and analysed under the identified aspects of the oral communication skills dimensions. The outcome of the analysis will be given to the teachers to be reviewed, commented on, and edited.

Data analysis

As is typical in qualitative research (Creswell, 2008), an inductive analysis of the data was adopted so that themes emerged from the data. Being an interpretivist study, there was on-going data analysis of the corpus of data which included transcripts of classroom observations field notes. The transcriptions and the field notes were used as a basis for identifying the main categories of participants' oral communication behaviours while responding to students' contributions; sociating/establishing and maintaining classroom rapport; organizing/giving instructions; directing; presenting/explaining; evaluating/correcting; and eliciting/questioning to the students. The process of analysis involved examining and re-examining the data to discover the emergence of recurrent patterns of oral communication skills. As the data was varied and dense, it was necessary first to identify the most noticeable pre-determined categories to allow for in-depth, thorough analysis.

As this study is primarily the analysis of transcripts of classroom communication, it was felt that elements of discourse analysis should be used which refers to the procedures used for examining chunks of written and spoken language (Allwright & Bailey, 1991). Being a classroom research, this study involved the analysis of the teachers' spoken language. According to Van Lier (1988, p. 122), it is 'an analysis of the processes of interaction by

means of close examination of audiovisual records of interaction'. It is important to bear in mind, however, that discourse analysis is a very broad term and covers many analytic processes, from coding to more qualitative interpretations. The latter is the procedure adopted in this study. Certain behavioural features of oral communication skills were examined to allow for a qualitative interpretation of patterns.

Taking these considerations into account and being aware of the anti-positivist, interpretive paradigm, the researcher chose to develop pre-determined categories which arose from the data. A taxonomy was self-developed, as outlined below. According to McDonough and McDonough (1997), "a researcher can develop his or her own categories for some particular research purpose" (p. 108). In this stance, existing sets of categories were utilised to suit the purpose of investigating patterns of oral communication skills which can only emerge from the data.

The data were openly coded to allow for the data to be categorised. The transcripts proved to be voluminous, which resulted in the identification of three sets of categories for further analysis. These are as follows:

- Bowers' categories of verbal behaviour in the language classroom (1980)
- Bleach's categories of teacher's use of oral communication skills (2000)
- Williams, Insoe, & Taskers' taxonomy of communication strategies (1997)

The first two categories of oral communication skills were developed for second language classroom research in particular and language education in general. The first set of categories, proposed by Bowers (1980), covered a wide variety of oral communication skills in teaching the language. Bowers' categories were directly derived from foreign language classroom data. The categories were used to analyse every utterance in the language lessons, either by students or teachers. Bowers' categories were developed for the analysis of teachers' oral communication skills, which consist of the following: responding to students' contribution; sociating/establishing and maintaining classroom rapport; organising/giving instructions; directing; presenting/explaining; evaluating/correcting; and eliciting/questioning. These aspects were all a focus of the present study of communicative competence. Therefore, Bowers' categories formed the first part of the taxonomy.

The second set of categories, proposed by Bleach (2000), included a nonverbal component of oral communication skills and other verbal components. These categories were developed by Bleach from normal teaching practice. A particular feature in these categories is that they make use of different levels of generalisations. This includes three categories of oral communication skills: teacher talk and language, explaining, and listening.

The above two sets of categories focused on mainly the same oral communication skills, as Bowers', and Bleach's categories provided more specific subcategories of oral communication skills and clearer definitions and examples. Examples of these oral skills are the use of different sentence structures of teacher talk, basic skills of explaining, making explanations easier to remember and understand, listening, and the different types of nonverbal components of oral communication skills. Oral communication skills and non verbal communication are related to the content of the lesson (Bowers, 1980; Bleach, 2000). These skills were all a focus of the present study of communicative competence. Therefore, Bleach's categories formed the second part of the taxonomy.

In this study, a third set of categories was developed for communication strategies. These strategies were adapted from Williams et al. (1997) who classified CSs into confirmation checks, clarification requests and comprehending/comprehension checks. These categories proved to be very useful for this study because many types of strategies observed in the data are the kinds included in this taxonomy. Williams et al.'s taxonomy is interactional-based. As an example, a strategy called 'clarification requests', is the echoic question type that seeks repetition or confirmation of something in the other. Although these two strategies are referred to as having the same meaning, the study included them both and made a distinction between them. Williams' et al. categories formed the third part of the taxonomy used in the present study.

The present study is therefore innovative in nature and uses an eclectic approach, covering a wide variety of oral communication skills and CSs. The advantage of the three-part taxonomy was that it has the potential to identify every oral communication skill and communication strategies that occurred.

The developed taxonomy includes three general categories: oral communication skills, nonverbal component of oral communication skills and communication strategies. It should

be noted, however, that because of the nature of communication, some oral communication skills could be in either category depending on the communicative context. The following Table 1 shows categories of examples of oral communication skills observed in classrooms and also a sample from the analysis of one participant.

Initial findings and discussions of the Development of Teacher Oral Competency Framework

Phase one

The interviews were conducted in person in order to prompt responses from the education experts and the framework's writer on the events that happened in the teacher education and gather in-depth information about teachers' competency and knowledge perceptions on oral communication skills when teaching and learning took place. The interview was conducted on 5 June 2009. The writer of the competency framework from Western Australia Education Department stated that:

Professional attributes outline the characteristics that are readily identifiable as essential to effective teaching. These attributes ensure teachers are prepared for the challenges, demands and obligations of teaching. In addition, professional attributes provide the underpinning values, beliefs and skills for the decisions and actions teachers make in their day-to-day work. They describe the attitudes and behaviours through which teachers demonstrate their ability to facilitate student learning. Effective teachers demonstrate the following professional attributes . . . and one of those is effective communicator. Teachers have a presence that creates a positive influence on students' behaviour. They can articulate their thoughts and ideas whilst modifying their language according to the context and audience.

Phase two

The developed taxonomy includes three general categories: oral communication skills, nonverbal component of oral communication skills and communication strategies. It should be noted, however, that because of the nature of communication, some oral communication skills could be in either category depending on the communicative context. The following table shows categories of examples of oral communication skills observed in classroom and also a sample from the analysis of one participant.

Table 1: Taxonomy of teacher's oral communication skills

Categories	Classroom
Securing students' attention/ sociating/ establishing and maintaining classroom rapport	Good evening everybody. OK. Sit down.
Organizing/giving instructions	For today, we're going to look at the things that we can count...
Directing	Students, be quiet...
Presenting/explaining	Now, look at your questions...
Evaluating/correcting	The word 'was' please remember...
Eliciting/questioning (e.g. <i>comprehension checks, clarification requests, confirmation checks, referential, display, expressive rhetorical</i>)	Where do you come from?
Discussion	
Listening	
Teacher talk and language - <i>Be simple, be short and be human</i>	
<i>The teacher varies the length of statements by using:</i>	
1. <i>the concrete noun rather than the abstract;</i>	What is a tray?
2. <i>the active voice rather than the passive;</i>	Something you put the food on. When you go to cafeteria, you put your... food, the drink on the tray.
3. <i>the short sentence rather than the long;</i>	I want the answer
4. <i>the simple sentence rather than the compound;</i>	I call you first
5. <i>the direct statement rather than the circumlocution;</i>	Look at page 96
6. <i>people as the subject whenever possible.</i>	Okay next one You can draw if you want to
Tone, volume and pace of voice	
Appearance	
Eagerness and interest	Nodding and head shaking
Confidence and caring	
Confirming/confirmation checks	Did you mean?
Clarifying/ clarification requests	What do you mean? Or sorry, I didn't understand)
Comprehending/comprehension checks	All right? OK? Understand? Or Do you know what I mean?
Reformulating/reformulations (<i>These utterances offer some modification of the previous utterance.</i>)	How do you spell: 'wives'? Which one, singular or plural?
Repetition (<i>These are exact duplications of what has been uttered</i>)	Ahmad was admitted...was admitted...please remember that
Circumlocution (<i>The strategy of describing the characteristics features of intended meanings or express his/her meaning in several words</i>)	Emotion? What? Again? Emotional...Emotional
Code switching (<i>The strategy of drawing upon L1 to solve the problem</i>)	What kind of 'rojak'?

The present study indicated that the teachers of English usually incorporate the subjects with many activities and visits to make them more interesting and thus the students may like these teachers more. In the observed lesson, the materials were presented in an interesting way by giving appropriate examples and illustrations whenever necessary. The lesson was mainly presented by means of discussion. The content of the lessons was closely related to the textbook used. Audio-visual aids are used in order to help the students understand the text

more intelligently, or to help them get better insight into the subject. The questions used in the lesson were thought provoking with some guidance and direction for the better understanding of them. Generally, a good learning atmosphere is created because the teacher is warm and friendly.

Conclusions and implications

The Framework is based on the premise that effective teachers draw on a body of professional knowledge in order to maximise their ability to improve student educational outcomes. Knowledge of students, curriculum, subject matter, pedagogy, education-related legislation and the specific teaching context is the foundation of effective teaching which enables teachers to be responsive to the changing needs of students.

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