

EMPLOYING NATIVE-SPEAKING MENTORS OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA: PERCEPTIONS OF ESL TEACHERS

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The Malaysian government has taken action to enhance the effectiveness of English Language among English as a second Language (ESL) student in Malaysia and the professional development of English teachers by employing native-speaking English mentors (NSEM) through teacher-training programmes such as Teaching English Language and Literacy (TELL) and English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP). English language teacher expressed some mixed feelings about NSEM in these training programmes; thus, this study aims to examine the general perceptions of Malaysian English teachers towards the NSEM. This study utilized a mixed-method approach and chose 39 primary school teachers from three different primary schools as respondents to fill in the questionnaires. The data collected from questionnaire was analyzed by using SPSS to obtain descriptive information and a total of six potential respondents were selected to attend the interview which provide the qualitative data for the study. The findings revealed that many local English teachers view the NSEM as effective mentors. On the other hand, some believed that the local English mentors can also perform equally well. This study helps to create and raise awareness of Malaysian English teachers towards teacher-training programmes involving NSEM. The information gathered from this study will be beneficial to English teachers as this study might help to change their perceptions towards NSEM in language classrooms.

Keywords: Native-Speaking English Mentors (NSEM), Local English Mentors, Malaysian English Teachers, English Language Teacher Development Project (ELTDP), Teaching English Language and Literacy (TELL).

1. INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian government has initiated some strategies to improve the professional development of English teachers so as to enhance students' English language proficiency. One of the plans is to employ NSEM through teacher-training programmes such as ELTDP and TELL to provide for more useful trainings for the English language teachers as these training programmes are aimed at improving the local English teachers' proficiency and equip them with distinct teaching skills so as to enhance students' mastery of English. The ELTDP, which is funded by the Malaysian Ministry of Education, and managed by the British Council, is a multi-pronged programme that aims at improving the quality of teaching and learning of English in primary schools, and to enhance the English proficiency of teachers of English as well as to promote the use of materials in order to support the learning and assessment of English. On the other hand, TELL is a programme that assists

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the Ministry of Education to improve English proficiency of teachers through the training provided by English language mentors in different clusters of primary schools and also to aid the primary school teachers to enhance their English teaching methods and proficiency.

In relation to this, throughout the duration these programmes were conducted, the English language teachers who attended the course expressed mixed reactions about the training programme, specifically about NSEM who handled the training sessions as mentors; some of these reactions were positive and some negative. During the MELTA 2010 Conference (2010), a conference that is attended by teachers nation-wide that discusses contemporary issues faced by teachers, the topic of NSEM was heavily debated (Wan Fatimah Solihah, 2016), and the conference concluded that NSEM would bring about benefits to the scenario of English language teaching and learning in Malaysia, while at the same time, causing possible challenges to the teachers and parties involved.

The mentoring programme such as TELL was reported as a working and effective programme because this programme helped English teachers to create and receive new useful ideas about teaching methodology (Lyne, 2015). Besides that, the Ministry of Education also claimed that the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) for these NSEM programme is to improve English language teachers' teaching skill and capability in schools (Ministry of Education, 2015). Hence, NSEM is believed to be a good way to assist teachers to enhance their teaching competency and language proficiency because the responsibilities of mentors are to monitor and observe teachers, to provide teaching methodology assistance and to arrange and conduct training sessions to empower teachers' teaching skills in the classroom (Hudson and Sempowicz, 2011).

Nevertheless, some people complained about the inclusion of NSEM in the teacher-training programme. One of the criticisms relates to the funds that are incurred when bringing in NSEM is the expenses consumed by Education Ministry on bringing in NSEM to train local English teachers because these expenses including salaries, accommodation and other expenses are not insignificant. There were views to channel these funds instead to local English mentors; some of whom are outstanding in their profession who are also regarded as outstanding English teachers in teacher-training programmes. This is also supported by Wan Fatimah Solihah (2016) who recommended that national funds could perhaps be allocated to a group of dedicated local experts. Some people also raised doubts over the background knowledge of NSEM on the Malaysian education context and teaching syllabus as well as their ability to adapt to the socio-cultural differences. In this respect, the role of local English mentors might be vital because Malaysia would need mentors to be bilingual because of the status of the English language as a second language (Melita, 2010). A research conducted by Kew and Faizah Mohamad

Nor (2016) revealed that the main challenges faced by the local English teachers who underwent these training programmes handled by the NSEMs is that they felt incompetent as English language teachers and that it was quite a feat trying to meet the expectations of the NSEMs.

Therefore, it is critical to gauge the views of Malaysian teachers of English on the issue of bringing in NSEM to train the local teachers of English with the purpose to up-skill English teachers and polish up the students' English proficiency. As a consequence, this study will look into the general perceptions of Malaysian English teachers towards the NSEM.

1.1 Teacher Training Programmes in Malaysia

Malaysian Ministry of Education funded the British Council to manage ELTDP with the objective to facilitate skills development and mentoring within the English teacher so that high quality of English education can be transferred and delivered to the students, particularly in stage one of primary education which is years one to three. Besides that, this project enables mentors to share materials with the purpose to support teachers' professional development and to give teachers the chance to share and utilize high quality teaching materials to support teaching the curriculum of English. This will hopefully promote the delivery of effective teaching lessons and facilitate teachers' professional development.

In this project, British Council mentors are responsible to visit schools and their trainees in regular way in order to find out their trainees' needs and to mentor them to overcome their teaching problems. Also, mentors will conduct group teacher training sessions on effective techniques to enhance their teaching methodology. Through this project, the teachers are guided and encouraged to implement and apply meaningful communicative teaching techniques in their classrooms. In this way, the project eventually aims to support Malaysian teachers to develop their own reflective practice and take ownership of their own professional development.

On the other hand, TELL is a 3 year contract which was from 2011 till 2013, on behalf of the Ministry of Education, to improve English through in-service teacher training. This programme is to assist the teachers in primary school to enhance their English teaching methods and proficiency. There are two major inputs in this programme. Firstly, there are Teacher Professional Development workshops after schools which are practical activity based sessions directly related to teaching the new KSSR syllabus for Year 1 and 2, and the KBSR for Year 3 students. Secondly, there are daily visits to the participating teachers in their schools involving co-teaching and individual coaching. By doing this, it enables better English teaching methodology providing meaningful and enjoyable English learning activities for lower primary students as well as greater proficiency and confidence in using English for the teachers.

1.2 The Role of Mentors

From the viewpoint of the teaching profession, mentors are regarded as experienced educators who actively aid those who are less skilled educators to achieve expected abilities and teaching experiences (Donaldson, 2008). The general role of a mentor consists of giving resources and providing chances for development, assisting the mentees to set high yet achievable career goals, giving feedback, monitoring their career progress and providing a role model (Carter and Lewis 1994). According to Mc Kimm and Hatter (2003), high qualities mentors are good interpersonal skills and inspired role model. They are open-minded, sincere, understanding and approachable. They also understand the level of competence of newcomer and the challenges of integrating into new work setting. Besides that, they also assist newcomer to set learning objectives, to apply knowledge in practice and to provide objective assessment of progress.

Besides that, there are some investigations done by researchers to point out that mentoring is an efficient solution for teacher retention problems and assisting teachers increase their confidence and development as educators (Donaldson, 2008; Hudson and Sempowicz, 2011; Baldauf and Nguyen, 2010; Hudson, Savran-Gencer, and Usak, 2010). Some teachers also report that effective mentoring has improved self-reliance, enhanced critical thinking ability, improved self-reflection, and increased professional development (Hudson Savran-Gencer, and Usak, 2010); thus, mentoring programme should be taken into account to train the English language teachers in Malaysia especially those teachers who have positive attitudes towards teaching English and their profession should be given incentives such as opportunities to participate in more training programmes such as mentoring for them to improve themselves (Kew and Faizah Mohamad Nor, 2016).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-methods approach and data were collected via questionnaire and interview. 39 Malaysian English teachers who had been teaching the English subject for more than five years from three different government primary schools were selected to fill up the questionnaires and six respondents were chosen to be interviewed. The data collected from the questionnaires were then analysed by using SPSS while the data from interviews were analysed qualitatively as interview allows in-depth data to reveal what lies behind the answers of a question (Gillham, 2005).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following table displays the data on the perceptions of Malaysian English teachers towards native-speaking mentors of English

TABLE 1: PERCEPTIONS OF MALAYSIAN ENGLISH TEACHERS OF NATIVE-SPEAKING ENGLISH MENTORS IN MALAYSIA

<i>Items</i>	<i>Frequency</i>				<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Dev.</i>
	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>		
1. Native-speaking English mentors play an important role in training local English teachers.	3 (7.7%)	10 (25.6%)	16 (41.0%)	10 (25.6%)	2.85	0.90
2. Native-speaking English mentors are much needed to train local English teachers.	2 (5.1%)	9 (23.1%)	17 (43.6%)	11 (28.2%)	2.95	0.86
3. The government needs to employ more native-speaking English mentors to train local English teachers.	9 (23.1%)	10 (25.6%)	16 (41.0%)	4 (10.3%)	2.38	0.96
4. Native-speaking English mentors can train local English teachers well.	3 (7.7%)	10 (25.6%)	20 (51.3%)	6 (15.4%)	2.74	0.82
5. Local English teachers can teach well even without the guidance given by native-speaking English mentors	1 (2.6%)	5 (12.8%)	24 (61.5%)	9 (23.1%)	3.05	0.69
6. Native-speaking English mentors are good and effective mentors.	0 (0%)	6 (15.4%)	25 (64.1%)	8 (20.5%)	3.05	0.60
7. Local mentors of English will provide training better than native-speaking English mentors.	4 (10.3%)	8 (20.5%)	14 (35.9%)	13 (33.3%)	2.92	0.98
8. I support native-speaking English mentors to train local English teachers	1 (2.6%)	4 (10.3%)	28 (71.8%)	6 (15.4%)	3.00	0.61

From Table 1, item 1 shows that more than half of the respondents, which is 26 (61.6%) respondents, perceived that NSEMs play an important role in training local English teachers. In fact, 10 (25.6%) of these 26 respondents strongly agreed that the role of the NSEM is significant in training the local English teachers. These teachers revealed that the TELL teaching training projects had reported great improvements in the teachers' teaching competency and at the same time teachers who participated in these programmes were found to have improved their proficiency in the language. This is because NSEMs monitor teachers, help with methodology and conduct training sessions to teach communicative language to the children. In addition they also help the teachers improve their personal communication skills and increase their confidence in using English. According to these respondents, teachers were given good advice on what good teaching is and how problems are overcome by these mentors through effective ways. More importantly, they reported that they gained personal support and useful suggestions

on how they can become great teachers. Throughout the mentoring process, mentees can develop their confidence and improve their well-being at the workplace (Baldauf and Nguyn, 2010; Hudson and Sempowicz, 2011).

On the other hand, 13 (33.3%) of the respondents perceived that the role of NSEM is not important. Three (7.7%) of them strongly disagreed with item 1 because they believed the local English teachers can teach well without the guidance from NSEM as the performance of the students in the English subject in UPSR 2014 was improving. The Education director-general, Khair Mohamad highlighted that there was improvement in the performance in five papers, six papers showed a decline, and one remained unchanged from 2013. One of the papers which showed improved performance was English Language. This improvement in the English language performance of UPSR students led to the belief that English teachers were doing a great job and that local mentors could play the same role as NSEMs in training local English teachers especially the teaching methodology. This is because non-native teachers had a better awareness of their student's linguistic needs and use, and also they understand the students' possible areas of difficulty (Cook, 2005). In the interview, one respondent indicated that

“Some senior local teachers in my school are very successful in teaching English as their students scored well in UPSR...”

This further provided evidence of the local teachers' faith and confidence in the ability of their own colleagues in carrying out the training programmes to enhance the skills of local teachers.

In contrast to the views expressed earlier, Item 2 in Table 1 shows that 28 (71.8%) of the respondents perceived that NSEM are much needed to train local English teachers. It is because these NSEMs can speak Standard English which the local teachers or local mentors would find difficulty with. Because they speak and use Standard English, most of the native teachers outperform the non-natives in pronunciation and are able to occupy central positions in English learning and teaching all over the world. Hence, native-speaking mentors are much needed to train local English teachers to speak proper English. In the interview, one respondent indicated that

“Native English speaker can speak English very fluent and appropriate... We can learn it from them without going to Western country to learn the slang...”

However, on the other hand, 11 (28.2%) of the respondents perceived that NSEM are not much needed to train local English teachers because some of the local English teachers scored excellent results in the Cambridge Language Assessment which means that these teachers do not really need NSEM to train them. Instead, it would be a waste of time if local English teachers need to spend extra-time to attend the training.

Moreover, Item 3 in Table 1 shows that 20 (50.3%) of the respondents were of the opinion that the government needs to employ more NSEM to train local English teachers but 19 (28.7%) of them objected to this move. Those who were in favour of bringing in NSEMs to train our teachers believed that this can motivate the local teachers to learn and improve their English with the guidance of NSEM who are carefully hand-picked and qualified to train the teachers. Some teachers also reported that effective mentoring has improved self-reliance, minimized segregation feelings, enhanced critical thinking ability, improved self-reflection, and increased professional development (Hudson, Savran-Gencer, and U^oak, 2010). Nonetheless, those who objected to this idea voiced out their concerns with regard to the funds that would be incurred should NSEMs be imported to Malaysia. Thus, the burden of the government will be increased to pay for their salaries and accommodation.

Item 4 in Table 1 shows that 26 (66.7%) of the respondents perceived that NSEM can train local English teachers well. Out of 26 respondents, six respondents strongly agreed with this statement because these six people who were the TELL programme participants revealed in the interview that their overall teaching profession development was improving because their mentors gave them useful input on strategic teaching of English; however, 13 (33.3%) of the respondents disagreed with the statements. One of the reasons is the mentors' background knowledge about Malaysian education system. Due to the different culture and education system, some of the respondents felt that these mentors do not really understand the learning style of a second language learner especially the difficulty they face when learning English. These mentors would not be good and effective mentors if they fail to find out the problems faced by the learners. It is because McKim (2003) claimed that high qualities mentors understand the level of competence of a newcomer and the challenges of integrating into new work setting they face that these mentors can assist them to solve the problems.

Additionally, item 5 in Table 1 shows that 33 (84.6%) of the respondents perceived that local English teachers can teach well even without the guidance given by native-speaking mentors. This is because the local English teachers are models of successful learners. All the processes and success of learning English which they themselves went through can motivate and encourage students to achieve the same success (Medgyes, 2006). Besides that, these local teachers can also be of benefit as they use the same mother tongue as they can communicate with the students and understand their problems. They possess bilingual or even multilingual competence, and Canagarajah (1990) pointed out that this competence "develops a deep metalinguistic knowledge and complex language awareness". However, six (15.4%) of the respondents disagree with this statement because these local teachers do not possess a very good command of English, in particular their oral proficiency. Reeves and Medgyes (1994) showed that there is a relationship between

the proficiency of the teachers and their self-image. With respect to this, local English teachers, who do not have high English proficiency, mostly have low self-image which directly affects their teaching ways.

Item 6 in Table 1 shows that 33 (84.6%) of the respondents perceived that NSEM are good and effective mentors respectively. Out of 33 respondents, eight respondents strongly agreed with this statement because the NSEM are trained mentors that they are capable to provide useful training for local teachers based on the needs of the teachers. In the interview, one respondent indicated that

“Native English speakers are open-minded, kind and knowledgeable... They also have enough teaching experiences that they can help to English problems in schools... There is no problem for them to train the local teachers...”

However, none of the respondents strongly disagree with the item 6.

Other than that, item 7 in Table 1 shows that 27 (69.2%) of the respondents perceived local mentors of English will provide training better than NSEM. This is because local English teachers (LET) are not only familiar with the syllabus and students' needs, but they also know the difficulties of learning English as a foreign language (Medgyes, 2006). Hence, they will provide most effective and appropriate guidance to local teachers in teaching English. In addition, out of 12 respondents, 4 (10.3%) respondents strongly disagreed with item 7. Because native speakers have the language proficiency, they speak fluent English and are able to use idiomatic expressions easily as they have “first-hand knowledge” (Kirkpatrick, 2007) and are “the owners” (Reeves and Medgyes, 1994) of the language, they normally do not have problems in pronunciation because they have acquired the language ever since they were born (Beare, 2013). Thus, these NSEM have capability to judge which sentences and utterances are grammatically appropriate.

Furthermore, item 8 in Table 1 shows that the majority of the respondents support NSEM to train local English teachers. Out of 34 (87.2%) of the respondents, 28 (71.8%) and six (15.4%) of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed with this statement respectively. The reason is they believed that the NSEM can assist the teachers in primary school to enhance their English teaching methods and proficiency. In the training, the mentors are responsible to measure, monitor, evaluate and report on the intended outcomes. By doing this, it enables better English teaching methodology providing meaningful and enjoyable English learning activities for lower primary students as well as greater proficiency and confidence in using English for the teachers. For example, those who participated in TELL programme claimed that the training helps to improve the quality of teaching and learning of English in primary schools and to enhance the English proficiency of teachers of English as well as to promote the use of materials in order to support the learning and assessment of English.

On the other hand, only five (12.9%) of the respondents perceived that they do not support NSEM to train local English teachers because these mentors lack understanding of Malaysian culture. According to Han (2005), the students actually expected their teacher to give more attention to their problems of learning English and if possible they hope the teachers have the knowledge of their language. This view is supported by Phillipson (1992) who claimed that non-native teachers (NNTs) can be better qualified than Native teachers (NTs) because they have been through the complex process of acquiring English, have insights on the difficulties of learning English and have first-hand experience of using English as a second language. Therefore, native-speaking mentors might not be able to understand the exact language learning problem faced by the Malaysian students and hence they could find it hard to design and implement appropriate teaching methodologies for greater effectiveness in students' acquisition of English for local teachers in the training.

Lastly, a mean of above 2.5 for the particular item would indicate that there is strong agreement towards the item stated in the Table 1. The means of all items in the table are above 2.5 which mean that the respondents have high level of agreement for all items except item 3 which is

“the government needs to employ more native-speaking mentors of English to train local English teachers”.

The results show that the respondents are somewhat undecided on their stand on whether NSEM or local teachers would make better mentors to our local English teachers. This is similar to the sentiment raised by the respondents of a study conducted by Wan Fatimah Solihah (2016) in which there were a few respondents who agreed with the move to employ NSEM in Malaysia while there were a few who opposed the suggestion. A comparison of the means of item 5 and 6 also indicates that both native-speaking English mentors and LETS are deemed well in the eyes of these respondents. This probably shows that both categories of trainers have their strengths, as viewed by these respondents.

However, if the result of item 3 is analyzed carefully, the mean of 2.38 for the statement on whether the government needs to employ more NSEM to train local English teachers would actually indicate that the respondents do not truly lead us to the idea that the respondents do not truly welcome the idea of the government employing more NSEM. Despite their belief that the NSEM make good mentors, there is still this reservation among the respondents for not whole-heartedly agreeing with the idea of bringing in more NSEM. Whether the underlying reasons are related to reduced opportunities in job employment among the local teachers who could actually gain promotion and be made mentors or whether there are other underlying reasons for this reservation, further research can uncover the real sentiments with regard to this issue

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results shown in this study, it can be concluded that the government is still encouraged to employ the native-speaking mentors of English to train the local English teachers for a short-term period plan as the respondents perceived NSEM positively in providing training to local English teachers and creating good effects on their professional development. Specifically, they believed that NSEM can train them efficiently and local English teachers can become more professional in teaching English because these trained and experienced mentors' mother tongue is English and they possess knowledge of English cultural connotations by which they can assist the local teachers to improve their English proficiency particularly with the speaking skill. Nonetheless, some of them feel that local English mentors could also perform equally well in training local teachers in terms of understanding the students' learning pattern and culture, and the problems faced by students as well as Malaysian education system and context. Consequently, meanwhile, it is recommended that the government should have another plan for some potential local English teachers who participate in the training so that they are well-trained to have a chance to become a new mentor who will also possess the same capability as NSEM to train other English teachers. By doing so, in the future the government can instill independence and confidence in local English teachers to become mentors in their own field of specialty and this can subsequently assist the government to reduce their burden in allocating a large amount of fund to employ native-speaking English mentors in Malaysia. This view has also been expressed by Wan Fatimah Solihah (2016) who believes that local experts are capable in training and nurturing their colleagues and that the utilization of local experts has already begun and Malaysia has already invested in local talents in Malaysian university which are now providing training to local teachers of English to upgrade and enhance their knowledge (New Straits Times, 2012).

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