

TEACHERS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND STRATEGIES IN THE ESL TEACHING CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the types and purposes of communication skills and strategies (CSs) used by English teachers in secondary classrooms. In addition, the teachers' perceptions of communication skills and CSs were also examined. Two excellent English language teachers in secondary schools in the northern regions of Malaysia were involved. Data were collected from classroom observations and interviews. Findings based on observations show that the teachers' communication with the students started with sociating, directing, giving instructions as well as summarising. The most common communication skills used by the teachers in the classrooms were explaining, questioning and eliciting. There were also nonverbal communication skills used by the teachers such as eye contacts, facial expressions and hand movements. When dealing with their communication difficulties, the communication strategies (CSs) employed by the teachers were confirmation check, comprehension check, clarification request, reformulation, repetition, circumlocution, code switching and non-linguistic strategies. Data from interviews suggest that the teachers' language backgrounds and beliefs influenced how they used their communication skills. The findings provide new empirical evidence that communication skills were related to and intertwined with communication strategies. The findings of this study provide insights on the excellent teachers' communication skills and strategies in line with the Professional Up-skilling of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT) as stated in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025.



Kemahiran Komunikasi Dan Strategi Komunikasi Guru Dalam Konteks Pengajaran Bahasa Inggeris Sebagai Bahasa Kedua

Kajian ini mengkaji jenis dan tujuan kemahiran komunikasi dan strategi komunikasi yang digunakan oleh guru-guru Bahasa Inggeris di sekolah menengah. Di samping itu, persepsi mereka terhadap kemahiran komunikasi dan strategi komunikasi turut dikaji. Dua orang guru cemerlang Bahasa Inggeris di sekolah-sekolah menengah di utara Malaysia telah terlibat dalam kajian ini. Data telah dikumpulkan daripada pemerhatian bilik darjah dan temu bual. Dapatan daripada pemerhatian bilik darjah menunjukkan bahawa komunikasi guru-guru dengan pelajar bermula dengan penyapaan, direktif, memberi arahan serta meringkaskan maklumat. Kemahiran komunikasi yang paling biasa digunakan oleh guru dalam bilik darjah ialah memperjelas, menyoal dan mencungkil maklumat. Terdapat juga kemahiran komunikasi bukan lisan digunakan oleh guru-guru iaitu penggunaan hubungan mata, ekspresi muka dan pergerakan tangan semasa mengajar. Untuk menangani kesukaran komunikasi, strategi komunikasi yang digunakan oleh guru ialah semak pengesahan (*confirmation check*), semak kefahaman (*comprehension check*), permintaan penjelasan (*clarification request*), perumusan (*reformulation*), pengulangan (*repetition*), lilitan bahasa (*circumlocution*), peralihan kod (*code switching*) dan strategi bukan linguistik. Dapatan daripada temu bual menunjukkan bahawa latar belakang dan kepercayaan bahasa guru mempengaruhi kemahiran komunikasi mereka. Penemuan kajian memberikan bukti empirikal baharu bahawa kemahiran komunikasi saling berkait dengan strategi komunikasi. Hasil kajian ini memberikan lebih kefahaman berkenaan kemahiran dan strategi komunikasi guru cemerlang selaras dengan Peningkatan Profesionalisme Kemahiran Guru Bahasa Inggeris (*Pro-ELT*) seperti yang dinyatakan dalam Pelan Pembangunan Pendidikan Malaysia 2013-2025.

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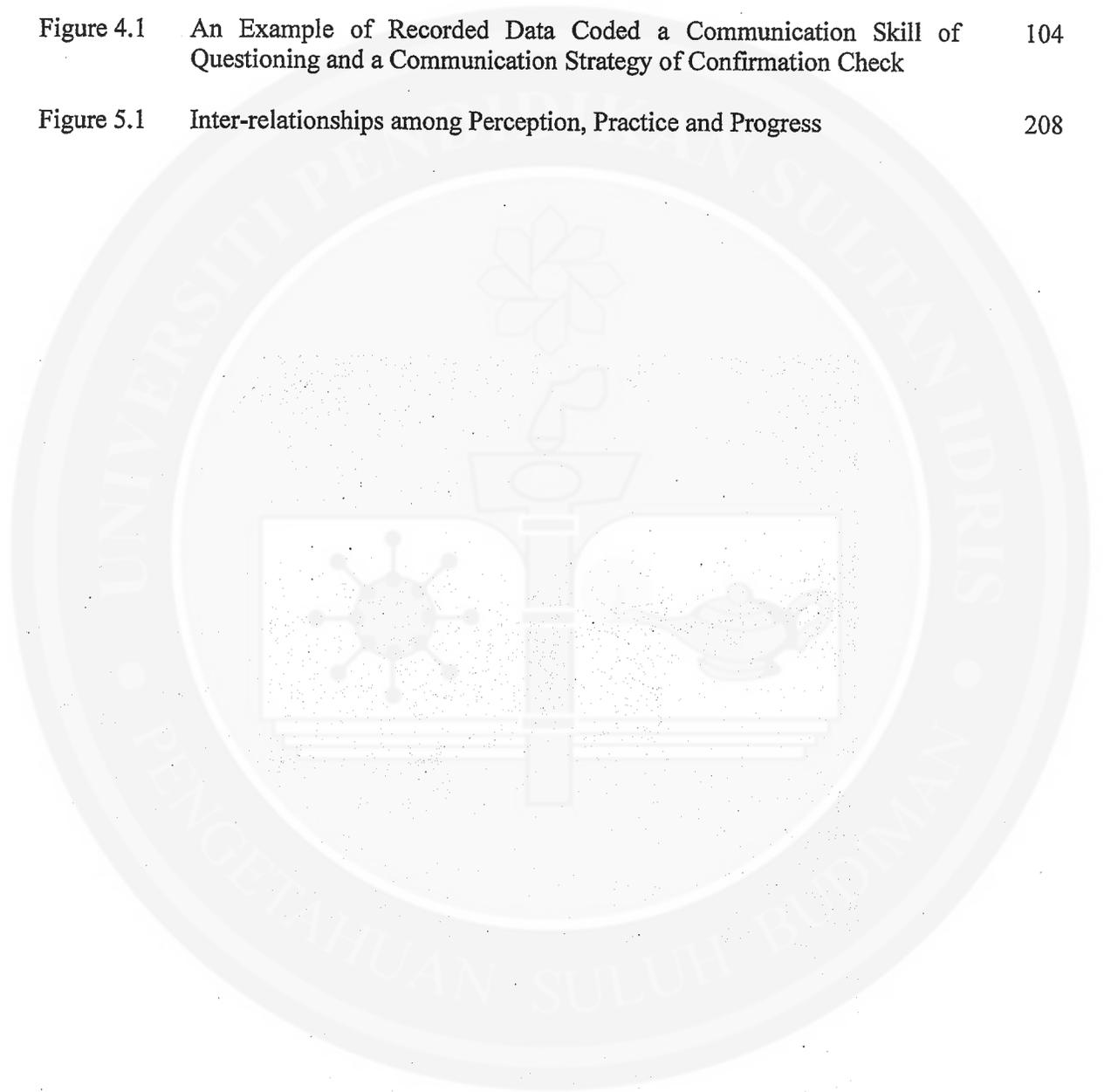
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List of Abbreviations

CA	Communicative Approach
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
ComS	Communication Skills
CSs	Communication Strategies
EC	Ethnography of Communication
ESL	English as a Second Language
GC	<i>Guru Cemerlang</i>
NSSIC	New Secondary School Integrated Curriculum

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This introductory chapter provides a brief overview of the factors that underpin the importance of undertaking a research into teachers' communication skills. This chapter also describes the study background, problem statement, the purpose, the research questions, significance of the study and definition of terms. The structure of the thesis is also outlined.

1.1 Background of the Study

In 1997, the Ministry of Education of Malaysia (MOEM) introduced The Education Act 1996 to replace the Education Act 1961. The new act reaffirmed the position of English as a second language in the country (MOEM, 1997) and “a compulsory subject of instruction” (MOEM, 1996) in all schools. In the Mid-term review of the 7th

Malaysian Plan, 1996-2000, allocation for education and training has increased by 1.6 per cent from the allocation under the 6th *Malaysian Plan, 1991-1995* (Economic Planning Unit, 1996). This was further strengthened in the Mid-term review of the 10th *Malaysian Plan, 2010-2015*. Education and training efforts are now being taken and intensified, not only to equip individuals with the appropriate knowledge and skills but also to produce responsible citizens with strong moral and ethical values.

Today, as a developing nation, it is the ambition of the Malaysian leaders to make Malaysia a fully developed country by the year 2020. This ambition is in line with the goals of *Vision 2020*, formulated by Tun Mahathir Mohamed, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, in 1991. It is envisaged that Malaysia could be a united nation, fused by strong moral and ethical values with an economy that is competitive, dynamic, and resilient (Hanafiah, 2000). In an effort to develop a technically competent labour force that will be essential for the attainment of *Vision 2020*, the Malaysian government is also very much aware of the need to produce Malaysians who can communicate in English effectively. From the perspective of *Vision 2020*, Malaysians need linguistic proficiency and competency in the language to take advantage of new career opportunities as Malaysia experiences rapid development and becomes an active participant in the attempt to keep up with today's globalised world (Hamidah, 2010).

For that purpose, a variety of programmes are planned through a five year strategic planning that was introduced in the 10th *Malaysian Plan, 2011-2015* covering a variety of agendas including economic, social, political and, last but not least, education. In the economic sector, most local and international business is conducted in English. Given the rapid expansion of global business activities, a growing number

of individuals find that communicating in English is very challenging. According to Nair-Venugopal (2001), education is the main determinant of the future of a nation because the nation so much depends on the success of its education system. To be successful in communicating in English, and to increase productivity, the education system of a country needs an educational model which can produce graduates who can help achieve the development of the nation (Gill, 2004). This is in line with *Vision 2020* and *Education Development Master Plan 2006-2010*. One of the key components of both documents is the urgent need for competent teachers in communication.

Internationally, it is evident that large numbers of ESL teachers in secondary schools require further professional development to improve their communication skills (Johnson, 2009). Current views of professional development generally position teachers as active participants who work democratically in their learning communities to address issues surrounding their work. A major goal is to build understandings that are 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; Kuh et al., 2005; Sidelinger, 2010).

The main problem facing teacher educators in Malaysia is that despite receiving a great deal of information on teaching methodology, many secondary school ESL teachers are still ineffective in the classroom due to their inability to cope with the linguistic demands required to effectively implement communicative activities in the classroom (Lim & David, 1995; Menon, 1993; Thang & Wong, 2005).

In addition, there has been little emphasis on effective use of communication skills for teaching and learning activities (Johnson, 2008).

1.1.1 Classroom Communication

Classroom communication includes face-to-face interactions and the communications necessary between the participants involved in the classroom to ensure that learning takes place. As Briscoe, Arriaza, and Henze (2009) suggest, it is within these face-to-face interactions that teachers use language to “communicate expectations of students, faculty, and parents; to discuss policies, praise people, propose changes in curriculum, indicate that they are listening, carry out disciplinary action, and for a host of other actions”(p.16). That is one of the ways why classroom communication differs from normal communication in the community - the main purpose of communication in a classroom is to instruct and inform.

In addition, communication in a classroom setting is unique because it has highly regulated patterns of communication between teachers and students, both of whom have a different status (the teacher has the higher status in the classroom if not in society as a whole). The higher status of the teacher allows him or her to conduct the class from beginning to end; he or she can choose the topic, decide how to divide the topic into smaller units, control who talks, and when and where they do so. Teachers, whether consciously or not, communicate (usually by using language) in order to orchestrate learning events in their classroom. According to Mercer (1995),

teachers use communication in the classrooms in order to accomplish three things: to elicit relevant knowledge from students, to respond to things that students say and to describe the classroom experiences that they share with students. It is hoped that by looking at the classroom communication, teachers' communication skills will be identified and teachers will become more aware of their communication skills and communication patterns that currently exist in their classrooms and will be able to evaluate whether these patterns provide opportunities for their students to learn.

1.1.2 The Importance of Teachers' Communication Skills

“Successful teaching and learning depends on the teacher’s effective use of communication skills with his/her pupils” (Bleach, 2000, p.10). In second language teaching, Brown (2001, p.165) stresses that “in the era of communicative language teaching, interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication; it is what communication is all about”. Communication in the classroom influences students’ perception of and participation in classroom activities (Farrell, 2009). Brown (2001, p.165) states that “interaction is the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people, resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other”. In addition, an interactional view sees language

as a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individuals ... Language teaching content, according to this view, may be specified and organized by patterns of exchanges and interaction or may be left unspecified, to be shaped by the inclinations of learners in interactions. (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 21).

This view is a major influence on discussions of language pedagogy. As a manager of the learning situation and facilitator of learning, a teacher needs to be

aware of the nature of classroom language use and be able to communicate effectively with his/her students (Johnson, 2009). This is important because teachers are constantly communicating with their students verbally and non-verbally (Bleach, 2000; Nesamalar, 2002).

According to Bleach (2000), teachers' communication skills are those that help their students understand what they say and how they say. Bleach (2000) proposes that the skills of voice, teacher talk and language, explaining, questioning, discussing and listening are used for getting students' attention. In the classroom, a large proportion of communication by the teacher is non-verbal. Teachers also need to manage the use of non-verbal cues in order to communicate effectively with the students. Non-verbal communication in this study, may take the following forms of how the teachers present themselves to students: appearance; eagerness; confidence; and degree of caring that teachers demonstrate. This is the perspective that will be taken in this research.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The quality of teachers plays an important role in producing good quality of teaching. To produce professional teachers, effective measures must be identified to raise the standard of the teaching profession. Teachers are the important and critical target group to take this challenge (Wan Mohd Zahid, 2003). This further indicates that teachers are the sole factor to help achieve excellence in education. Teachers are responsible to impart knowledge to the students and it is important that teachers are

able to master every form of skills including class control, teaching techniques, and the use of effective communication skills. In the teaching and learning context, communication plays an important role in the classroom because exchange of knowledge takes place between one individual to another and from one group to another (Shukri, 1997). Subsequently, teachers with good teaching techniques will be able to draw the students' attention in the teaching and learning process (Abdullah & Ainon, 2002; Kogut & Silver, 2009).

In this millennium and with the advent of the information age, it is imperative that the status of teachers in Malaysia should be defined, clarified and refined. There should be a rigorous increase in initial teacher training and new modes of delivery. As Nunan (2002, 1996, pp. 86-87) remarks, "Teachers with training but with little or no classroom experience will have a limited store of schemata...". It is the schemata, mental representations of classroom experiences and events, which are crucial to both understanding and being able to verbalize that understanding.

According to Kenneth (2007), without communication, the teaching and learning process will not take place. Therefore, teachers with good communication skills will create a more successful teaching and learning ambience for the students. Bleach (2000) states that, in general, teachers of English assume that they can communicate well. However, when their oral communication skills are analyzed, they face a variety of difficulties (Bleach, 2000). They have the challenge of how best to convey their messages and how to remain in the communication until they achieve their communicative purpose. On the other hand, someone with great communication skills has the potential to influence others and effective communication strategies will

lead to success (Canale, 1983; Bygate, 2003; Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). In order for this to happen, teachers must be satisfied in their work to produce an effected teaching that will mould quality students. Furthermore, there are always issues related to the importance of teaching and learning process which will be highlighted and how the process is being carried out in schools. A teacher can be good, excellent or vice versa depending on the influence that the school has in upgrading the teachers' professionalism (Abd. Rahim, 2007). Woods and Weasmer (2002) are of the opinion that teachers who are satisfied in their work will strive harder to achieve excellence, have good rapport with their colleagues and work harder to improve their quality of work. In addition, Kazi et al. (2012) study the need of thinking skills and job satisfaction among excellent teachers. Both factors are seen as the main elements in influencing the teaching and learning atmosphere in the classroom. Thus, it is very crucial to give appropriate recognition to efficient and outstanding teachers in their profession because only quality teachers are able to master effective teaching and learning. However, very seldom, teacher's communication skills in their work are being focused on even though teachers play a larger role and a wider scope in being motivated to carry out a perfect job.

Moreover, in Malaysia, Hashim Adnan, (NST, Aug 8, 2011) National Union of the Teaching Profession President, states that the reason for the students' poor level of English is not the curriculum but the fault of teachers. This is closely linked to their language proficiency. From the major finding of the survey, Malaysian Education Ministry deputy director-general Datuk Dr Khair Mohamad Yusof revealed that two-thirds of 70,000 English teachers in Malaysia failed to reach a proficient English level when the initial profiling of the English teachers in Malaysia was made. As a result,

the teachers were required to sit for the Cambridge Placement Test and to attend the Professional Up-skilling of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT) to enhance proficiency as well as pedagogic competence (MOE, 2013). Underlying this is the belief that it may be a potentially important first step towards a deeper understanding of English teachers' knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities in keeping abreast with rapid changes in knowledge and methodology. This situation then leads the teacher to choose a whole class instruction with aims to teach, manage and instruct the students altogether easily. In reaching those aims, teachers should have good communication skills such as explaining, questioning and listening (Farrell, 2009). However, due to the ineffective communication skill of a teacher, a concern could emerge, for instance, unmotivated situation, passive learning, and boredom among the students. It is essential for teachers to have a good communication skill not only because it can engage students' learning but also it can generate interactive communication with students (Groundwater-Smith, 2003). Because of that, teachers need to be aware of their communication skills and ask themselves whether they already have an effective classroom communication or not. Hence, in light of the statement, the present study appears to be one of the few and one of the first that puts weight on the interaction and communication of the teachers.

In Malaysia, there is a lack of research conducted on teachers' communication skills (Roselan, 2001; Syofia, Zamri, Jamaludin & Hamidah, 2012; Rozita & Abdul Rashid, 2012). Most studies have been conducted with *Bahasa Melayu* excellent teachers. Rozita and Abdul Rashid (2012), investigate the practice of teaching writing of five *Bahasa Melayu* excellent teachers in the classroom. In the study, the practice of teaching writing in *Bahasa Melayu* by the language teachers in the classroom

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focuses on teacher's verbal application including variety of ways in teaching writing using various approaches, methods and techniques that are planned, prepared, developed, and concluded with assessments and feedbacks. Thus, this study seeks to explore English language excellent teachers' communication skills.

Teachers' communication skills are important for teaching English language in Malaysia because the English curriculum focuses on the communicative language teaching (CLT) using communicative approach (CA) towards developing students' communicative competence. This led to a shift away from a focus on accuracy and the forms of language, to a focus on communication and fluency. Although there are different interpretations of communicative language teaching, this approach to L2 interpretations typically focuses on functions of language use and a more authentic use of language in the L2 classroom. In other words, instead of focusing on the sentence level forms, it centers on discourse level functions. With its emphasis on fluency over accuracy, and a focus on encouraging learners to communicate their messages and intentions using the linguistic resources available to them, teachers should model and acquire effective communication skills when teaching, therefore, there is a need for such study. This research chooses to study "excellent" teachers because the Malaysian Ministry of Education has defined Excellent Teacher as teachers with excellent personality, knowledge and skills, excellent work performance, communication, and an excellent potential for professional growth. Moreover, it is relevant to study the best from the best and that is to observe whether excellent teachers are competent communicators and how they practise their communication skills in everyday teaching. In addition, their communication skills can be used as benchmarks when evaluating or assessing other teachers' communication skills. Finally, the focus of this

study is on English Excellent Teachers and their communicative competencies as teachers, their communication skills and communication strategies in their teaching contexts in order to elucidate good practices which correspond to the English language teaching principles and features to be shared with other English teachers in the classroom settings.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The overall aim of this study is to determine English as Second Language (ESL) teachers' communication skills as displayed in their second language (L2) classrooms.

There are four specific aims:

- (a) to investigate teachers' communication skills when they engage in their classroom teachings;
 - (b) to identify the communication difficulties they face when communicating in the classrooms;
 - (c) to determine the strategies used to overcome these communication difficulties;
- and
- (d) to examine the teachers' perceptions of their communication skills.

1.4 Research Questions

Specifically, the study examines the ESL teachers' communication skills when teaching. The study addresses the following research questions:

Q1. What communication skills do teachers use to communicate with their students when teaching in their secondary school classrooms?

Q2. What kind of communication difficulties, if any, do teachers experience when teaching?

Q3. What kind of communication strategies do teachers use to cope with their communication difficulties?

Q4. How do teachers perceive their own communication skills in their teaching contexts?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study of ESL teachers' communication skills in their teaching contexts is significant for many reasons. First, this study would address the paucity of research documenting teachers' communication skills in relation to teaching practices. The lack of research attention to the challenges of communication skills in classroom communication would introduce a gap in ESL professionals' and general educators'

knowledge. The population of ESL teachers in Malaysia has grown steadily in the last few decades (Teacher Education Division, 2007), yet communication skills of teachers remained unknown (Harison Mohd Sidek, 2010). Little is known about how ESL teachers are dealing with their communication skills when teaching (Hazlina, Nik Suryani & Airil Haimi, 2012). This study would therefore, start with the excellent ESL teachers because they are supposed to be the benchmark. This study is apparently one of the first few attempts to investigate excellent teachers in terms of communication skills in the Malaysian ESL secondary classrooms. It is hoped that the findings of this study will be an eye opener and provide much understanding regarding the excellent teachers' communication skills and practices in the country. In relation to that, this study is hoped to be able to assist the teachers in reevaluating the strengths and weaknesses of their communication skills and practices. The invaluable knowledge and experience can be shared among the other teachers in helping them improve students' communication in their respective schools. This will be of great assistance to newly appointed teachers in adopting the most suitable and effective communication in their teachings towards excellence and to produce Malaysian citizens who are well-rounded, skilful and cherish the goal of achieving national unity. Aspiring teachers will be able to learn from the experiences of the excellent teachers in this selected school; most importantly what they do and do not do in contributing towards the excellent achievement of their students and consistently maintaining the excellence. Therefore, this study may provide a useful launching pad for further research in this area of interest.

This study is also significant because it would extend and integrate the theory of English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching. The influence of conceptions of