TEACHER BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE COMPETENCE TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN AUTONOMOUS LEARNING MODEL

DWEE CHIEW YEN

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In Stephen Covey's book entitled 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People', one of the habits he mentioned was to 'begin with the end in mind'. Therefore, I wrote this acknowledgement long before I completed my master's thesis as a way of encouraging myself to complete this journey of self-discovery, together with the people who made it happen.

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I would also like to thank my parents and siblings for their love and support, without which I wouldn't have been able to concentrate on both my work as well as my studies. Special thanks also go to my dearest colleagues who helped me immensely by generously sharing their ideas, feedback and research experience. My heartfelt thanks also goes to the participants of this study who contributed to this study significantly in terms of their time, effort and personal experience. To my dear friends who have been with me throughout this journey, I thank you for your constant prayers and encouragement.

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ABSTRACT

There is great impetus for English courses in institutions of higher learning (IHL) at present due to its functional importance as a tool for individual and national development, graduate employability and life-long learning. However, it remains a common complaint among employers that Malaysian fresh graduates lack English proficiency and critical thinking skills. Thus, this qualitative study sets out to examine the focus and emphasis on English language proficiency, critical thinking skills and study skills of five (5) English courses offered by Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and document analysis. The interviews conducted with five teachers and ten students were transcribed using Transana software before being coded for analysis. A grounded theory approach which emphasises on several stages of data collection and constant comparison of data was employed to interpret the data. The main findings revealed that teachers in general think that language proficiency, critical thinking and study skills are important for tertiary level English classrooms. However, actual teaching practices were found to differ from the teachers' beliefs towards critical thinking and study skills due to challenges which can be categorised as teacher factors, student factors and institutional factors. Finally, several important criteria were identified from the findings to form an autonomous learning model for English language communicative competence called the SITE Model. The findings of this study especially the current beliefs and teaching practices of teachers as well as the proposed SITE Model may serve as a reference point for researchers, educators and policy makers to develop effective English language curriculums for enhancing communicative competence among learners.

ABSTRAK

Kursus bahasa Inggeris di institusi pengajian tinggi (IPT) semakin diperlukan kerana kepentingannya dalam pembangunan individu dan negara, keupayaan graduan untuk mendapat pekerjaan dan pembelajaran sepanjang hayat. Namun, pihak majikan sering mengadu bahawa graduan tempatan masih lemah dalam penguasaan bahasa Inggeris (BI) dan kemahiran pemikiran kritikal (KPK). Oleh itu, kajian kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk meneroka fokus dan penekanan terhadap penguasaan BI, KPK dan kemahiran belajar dalam lima (5) kursus BI yang ditawarkan oleh Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) melalui temubual separa berstruktur, pemerhatian bilik darjah dan analisis dokumen. Sesi temubual dengan lima orang guru dan sepuluh orang pelajar telah ditranskripsi menggunakan perisian Transana sebelum dikodkan untuk analisis. Pendekatan *grounded theory* yang memberi penekanan kepada beberapa peringkat pengumpulan data dan perbandingan data secara berterusan digunakan untuk mentafsir data. Kajian ini mendedahkan bahawa guru-guru secara amnya berpendapat bahawa penguasaan BI, KPK dan kemahiran belajar adalah penting untuk kelas Bahasa Inggeris di peringkat IPT. Namun, amalan pengajaran yang sebenar didapati berbeza daripada tanggapan guru terhadap KPK dan kemahiran belajar disebabkan cabaran-cabaran yang boleh dikategorikan sebagai faktor guru, faktor pelajar dan faktor institusi. Akhirnya, beberapa kriteria penting telah dikenal pasti daripada hasil kajian untuk membangunkan satu model autonomi; Model SITE untuk kecekapan komunikatif BI. Hasil kajian ini terutamanya kepercayaan dan amalan pengajaran semasa guru-guru serta Model SITE yang dicadangkan boleh digunakan sebagai titik rujukan untuk para penyelidik, pendidik serta penggubal dasar untuk membangunkan kurikulum bahasa Inggeris yang berkesan untuk meningkatkan kemahiran berkomunikasi dalam kalangan pelajar.

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THE STUDY

This study began in March 2015 when I was in my 2nd year as an English language teacher at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia. I was very fortunate to have had the opportunity to talk to Dr Elizabeth M. Anthony the year before about the opportunity to work on a project. The title, "Teacher Beliefs and Practices in Communicative Language Competence Towards the Development of an Autonomous Learning Model", fascinated me immensely and so I decided to go for it as a part-time master's student.

In the process of researching the topic, collecting data and writing papers, I have learnt a lot through trial and error. It was a lonely journey, to be honest, often working by day and having to write by night and even weekends. The most rewarding experience for me during my master's journey was the opportunity to attend both local and international conferences and use them as a platform to share my research with other like-minded academicians. I first attended a Symposium on 'Coaching for Autonomous Literacy and Language Learning' at the University of Munster, 18 March 2016, to prepare myself for my master's research. There, I met many academicians and language teachers who were interested to explore coaching approaches to develop autonomous learning skills. I also received a lot of insights through the workshops and coaching experience shared by fellow participants.

My very first conference, GloBELT 2016, was held at Kremlin Palace located in Antalya, Turkey on 14-17 April 2016. It was a really humbling experience as I presented my first paper, "Creating Thinking Classrooms: Perceptions and Teaching Practices of ESP Practitioners" in front of an international audience. I received really encouraging feedback from the audience and questions that made me ponder on how I could improve my research. I was also awestruck as I got the rare opportunity to meet Professor David Little, an established academician whose work on learner autonomy I have read so much about. The paper I presented during the conference has been

published by Elsevier's open access journal which is Procedia-Social and Behavioural Sciences in October 2016 (http://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.10.087)

During my second conference at the 5th World Congress on Technical Vocational Education and Training (WoCTVET) held on 1st November 2016 in Johor Bahru, I presented my paper on "Roles and Applications of Study Skills for Tertiary Level English Courses: Teacher and Student Perspectives". The review process for the manuscript has been duly completed in April 2017 and is scheduled to be published in July 2017 in the Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (JSSH) under Pertanika Journals, which is a Scopus indexed journal.

In addition, I have also written a paper with my supervisor entitled "Learner Autonomy in University English Classrooms: Teachers' Perceptions and Practices" which was submitted in September 2016 and successfully published by the International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature in January 2017 (http://www.journals.aiac.org.au/index.php/IJALEL/article/view/2882/2448). This Australian-based peer-reviewed international journal publishes papers under the scope of English language, linguistics and literature.

The final paper written before I started focusing on the completion of my thesis was presented at the Indonesia-Malaysia English Language Teaching (IMELT) conference which was held in Jakarta, Indonesia, in March 2017. The title of the paper is "Critical Thinking Skills: The Teachers' ABC (Attitudes, Beliefs and Confidence)". It was yet another enriching experience to share my research findings as well as my master's journey with my audience who were largely made up of pre-service TESL undergraduates and who were also deeply interested in the topic. I also had the honour to meet and talk to Dr Andrezj Cirocki who also specialises in learner autonomy and L2 learning. The paper presented during this conference is scheduled to be published after the peer review process is completed in August 2017.

All publications mentioned above can be found online using the links provided. It is a summary of the work I have done so far and I am immensely grateful to my supervisor, my colleagues, the participants of this study, my family and friends for their patience, continuous encouragement and support throughout the two and a half years of my master's journey.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

As our world rapidly advances in the fields of science and technology, capable and dynamic human capital is becoming increasingly important and sought after by prospering businesses and nations. The situation is no different in Malaysia. However, fresh graduates in Malaysia are still finding it difficult to secure a job. Why is that so? According to the latest statistics, Dr Seri Abdul Wahid Omar, a minister at the Prime Minister's Department, reported that 161,000 university graduates are among the 400,000 people who are currently unemployed in Malaysia (Bernama, 2015). This is a serious issue which needs to be tackled at its core and brings us to the next question: What do Malaysian undergraduates lack in terms of skills and capabilities? Academic merit alone nowadays is no longer the main criteria in securing a job (Ismail, 2011). While achieving excellent results may help a graduate to stand out from the rest, employers today are more concerned with generic skills possessed by graduates such as the ability to communicate efficiently, particularly in the English language, as well as critical thinking ability.

Realising this mismatch in terms of the quality of graduates required by the industry and the quality of graduates produced by local institutions of higher learning, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has come up with a National Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012-2017) which attempts to transform and tackle the loopholes in terms of curriculum and pedagogy in institutions of higher learning (IHL) in order to boost

graduate employability in Malaysia. Apart from that, the Ministry of Education has also identified several generic skills deemed most important for graduates to secure a job. The seven skills include Communication Skills, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills, Lifelong Learning and Information Management, Integrity and Professional Ethics, Teamwork Skills, Entrepreneurship Skills, and Leadership Skills (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). Singh, Thambusamy and Ramly (2014) argued that the main concern for IHLs nowadays is no longer confined to the types of generic skills necessary for graduate employability, but how and to what degree can those skills be inculcated through our education system. This is especially important because even though the Ministry of Education has highlighted the importance of generic skills in all IHLs, till today no clear guidelines exist on how these skills can actually be embedded across disciplines. The inculcation of generic skills in the education system is also useful for the promotion of self-directed learning or learner autonomy which has been emphasised in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (2013). However, Singh et al. (2014) found that even though the industries and universities agree on the skills needed to produce well-rounded graduates, the actual integration of generic skills in may have been sidelined due to the largely exam-oriented education system.

As one of the relatively young public IHLs in Malaysia, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn (UTHM) is constantly striving to produce quality graduates in line with the nation's aspirations. As many students who join the university possess low English proficiency i.e. MUET (Malaysian University English Test) Band 1 or Band 2, the Centre for Language Studies (CLS), UTHM, offers a number of English language courses to help equip students with the necessary English language skills for academic purposes as well as future employment needs. Academic English or English for Academic Purposes was first introduced in 2006 in UTHM (Mohd Noor & Abd Kadir, 2007) to equip students with English language skills needed to cope with their courses in university as well as to assist them in achieving the minimum requirement of Band 3 in the MUET exam. Other courses such as Effective Communication, Technical Writing and Technical Communication were also developed to cater to students' specific needs in university as well as their future working environment. The latest course added to the list of English courses offered is a course called Foundation English which was introduced in 2013. It focuses mainly on

grammar knowledge and aims to help students become more confident and proficient English users in reading, listening, speaking and writing.

As an English language teacher who has been teaching in UTHM for slightly more than two years, I realised that many students are still struggling to achieve the minimum band three in MUET despite having gone through the English language courses offered by UTHM. I also observed that many students still found it difficult to express themselves in English although they have been learning English at primary and secondary school level for 11 years. It is shocking, but true. This is especially evident during tasks that require them to produce the language, such as report writing or oral presentations. Nevertheless, this does not apply to everyone as there are a small number of students who can speak and write in English well. However, the scenario described earlier clearly demonstrates the serious lack of English proficiency among the majority of UTHM undergraduates. The question that remains to be answered is: Why? As a teacher and a researcher, I felt compelled to find out about the current teaching instructions in UTHM's English language classrooms so that more can be done to improve the current situation of undergraduates who are weak in the English despite many years of learning the language.

1.2 The status of English in Malaysia

The status of English in Malaysia has evolved through the years due to historical and educational factors during pre-independence and post-independence. During the colonisation period of the British in the 1950s, schools which used English as a medium of instruction were introduced (Hanapiah, 2004). However, English medium schools during that particular period were mainly for children of the elite class as the schools were mostly situated in the town area and incurred high tuition fees. The mastery of English during that time was mainly important for trade, transport and mass media (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014).

After Malaysia achieved independence in the year 1957, Malay was accorded the status as the national language whereas English became the second most important language which was mainly used for administration purposes (Darmi & Albion, 2013). English was eventually replaced by the Malay language as the medium of instruction beginning 1970 in national schools. Although English continued to be taught as a

compulsory subject in primary as well as secondary schools across the nation, it was undeniable that the switch in the medium of instruction reduced the exposure of Malaysian students towards English considerably (Darmi & Albion, 2013). In the 1980s, two main reformations to the education system which focused on the development of learners' English language competence were introduced namely the New Primary School Curriculum (KBSR) and the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM). In a further move to improve the mastery of English among students, English was reintroduced as a medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools. Unfortunately, this initiative was abandoned soon after mainly due to the wide gap in achievement between learners from rural and urban areas as well as disagreement among the Malay and Chinese communities in Malaysia (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014).

Even though the status of English has undergone many changes and faced various obstacles since the days before independence due to historical factors and changes in the education policy, it is clear that English remains the most important language for Malaysians to move forward and remain competitive in the local and international job market even though Bahasa Melayu is the official language in Malaysia (Sarudin, Zainab, Zubairi, Tunku Ahmad & Nordin, 2013). This is why efforts such as the proposal to make English a compulsory pass subject in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination, the introduction of the "To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia and to Strengthen the English Language" (MBMMBI) policy in 2012 and the National Graduate Employability Blueprint (2012-2017) have been made by the Malaysian government in the hopes of restoring the status of English back to its glory days.

1.3 Problem statement

As explained above, the use and importance of the English language in Malaysia has undergone numerous phases. Contrary to the ideal intentions and efforts envisioned by the Ministry of Education however, the actual scenario with regards to the mastery of the English language among students is not very encouraging. Even though students receive 11 years of formal English language classes in primary and secondary schools and continue to learn English even at tertiary level, an alarming number of Malaysian students

remain weak in their command of the English language (Che Musa, Koo & Azman, 2012; Jalaluddin, Norsimah & Kesumawati, 2008; Singh & Singh, 2008).

One of the possible reasons which led to this situation could be due to the gap between English language teaching and English communicative requirements. Teachers and lecturers alike are often left wondering if their students use English beyond the classroom in any meaningful way. Ismail, Hussin and Darus (2012) have highlighted that most IHLs in Malaysia provide not more than six hours of instruction in the English language per week, especially for degree courses which are not conducted in English in a number of public universities. This may have caused students to have few opportunities to use English beyond classroom hours and thus contributed to their lack of communicative competence.

Besides low English proficiency, Malaysian employers are particularly concerned about graduates' lack of higher order thinking skills (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, 2013). In fact, a previous study by Yunus, Hamzah, Tarmizi, Abu, Nor and Ismail (2006) showed that Malaysian undergraduates performed moderately in terms of critical thinking ability. This is worrying as it shows that Malaysian undergraduates lack critical thinking skills necessary to stay competitive in the workforce. Realising the importance of producing well-rounded human capital, progressive steps have already been taken by Malaysian Ministry of Education over the years to incorporate the critical thinking component into the education system through the curriculum as well as assessments for core subjects such as English. In fact, concepts such as student-centred learning, active learning, project-based learning, and inquiry-based learning which are integral for the development of learner autonomy have been mentioned in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (2013).

One of the reasons why the element of learner autonomy is still sorely missing in English language classrooms could be due to the exam-oriented system and the traditional teacher-centred approach in the Malaysian education system (Thang, 2005; Thang & Alias, 2008; Yunus and Arshad, 2014). In order for a learner-centred approach to be effective, the roles of learners and teachers have to change. Students are required to play a more active role by taking more responsibility for their learning and critically select study skills to help them achieve their goals. Teachers, on the other hand, can help encourage learner autonomy by facilitating students in applying learning strategies

(Çakici, 2015) which have been shown to develop proficient language learners (Oxford, 1990). Thus, the focus on critical thinking and study skills in English classrooms should be investigated in order to encourage the development of learner autonomy and language proficiency. Another possible reason which could have led to the lack of learner autonomy in English classrooms is the "dissonance of instructor beliefs and actual practices of inculcating those skills employers want" (Singh et al., 2014). Consequently, this calls for a closer look into teachers' perceptions as well as the teaching and delivery of the curriculum.

Due to the situations described earlier as well as the lack of research on teachers' actual implementation of generic skills within the university curricula (Singh et al., 2014), there is a pressing need to examine the reality of tertiary level English language classrooms through the current practices and perceptions of English teachers towards language proficiency, critical thinking skills and study skills. Understanding the teachers' perceptions and teaching practices in the process of integrating those skills within English courses could illuminate the criteria useful for developing autonomy and communicative competence among local graduates as well as the challenges that come along with it.

1.4 Aims of the study and research questions

The above-mentioned background, self-reflection and paucity of previous research served as a point of departure in this study to explore the reality of English language classrooms. Teaching and learning in a language classroom amongst others involves obviously the teachers, students, resources, pedagogy and methodology. All these factors need to blend and complement each other to ensure a smooth flow of the lesson and successful teaching and learning. Thus, this study aimed to assess the current practices and challenges of teaching instructions and integrate the importance for teachers to focus on the aspects of language proficiency, critical thinking skills and study skills. An autonomous language learning model for communicative competence would then be developed based on the findings. As such, the following research questions guided this study:

(i)   What are the English teachers' beliefs and practices in terms of focus on language proficiency, critical thinking skills and study skills in English classrooms?

(ii)   What are the English teachers' perceptions on the importance of language proficiency, critical thinking skills and study skills in English classrooms?

(iii)   What are the challenges English teachers face in classrooms in the process of improving the language proficiency, critical thinking skills and study skills of students?

(iv)   What are the criteria which should be included in an autonomous language learning model?

1.5   Research objectives

The corresponding research objectives based on the research questions put forward in this study are as follows:

(i)   To find out whether English teachers in UTHM focus on language proficiency, critical thinking skills and study skills of their students in English classrooms in terms of beliefs and actual teaching practices.

(ii)   To investigate the perceptions of English teachers in UTHM on the importance of language proficiency, critical thinking skills and study skills in English classrooms.

(iii)   To examine the challenges English teachers face in English classrooms in the process of improving the language proficiency, critical thinking and study skills of students

(iv)   To develop an autonomous learning model for English language communicative competence based on data collected via the grounded theory approach

1.6   Scope of the study

This study mainly involved language lecturers/teachers in UTHM who teach English courses offered by the Centre for Language Studies in semester 1, 2015/2016. The courses included Foundation English, Academic English, Technical Communication, Technical Writing and Effective Communication. On the other hand, the students selected for the interviews through homogeneous sampling were those who were taking the English courses taught by the lecturers/teachers who were also the participants for this study.

1.7 Significance of the study

The study is important because it contributes to the development of an autonomous autonomous model for communicative language competence (further described in chapter 6) and new knowledge on English language teaching and learning, specifically the importance of focusing on areas such as language proficiency, critical thinking skills and study skills. The findings are also significant for teachers because it could help them to reflect on their teaching practices and understand ways to empower their students to become more autonomous learners in the process of English learning.

The main findings of the study suggested that achieving language fluency is the primary goal of English language teachers in English classrooms. It also revealed that although critical thinking and study skills are generally thought to be important, the actual teaching practices related to these two aspects were rather limited due to reasons such as teachers' focus on course content, teachers' personal assumptions and lack of readiness to incorporate those skills. The teachers in general also thought that critical thinking skills and study skills should be embedded in the curriculum instead of being taught explicitly.

Furthermore, the challenges that teachers face in the process of improving the language proficiency, critical thinking skills and study skills of the students were classified as teacher factors, learner factors and institutional factors. The challenges which have been identified may be useful for relevant authorities such as educators and policy makers in making the necessary changes in the curriculum, English module development, teacher training programs and education policies to reflect the development of learner autonomy and communicative competence.

Finally, this study is significant as it has also identified several important criteria and proposed an autonomous language learning model to develop communicative competence among learners. These criteria include skills, interaction, tasks and empowerment which together form the SITE Model which is explained in detail in Chapter 6. With further implementation and tests using the model in future research, it is expected to raise the English language proficiency among Malaysian graduates.

1.8   Definition of terms

The following section provides definitions of key terms used in this study.

1.8.1   Language proficiency

In general, language proficiency refers to a learner's ability to perform certain tasks in a language competently which normally covers the ability to listen, read, write and speak. Communicative competence or the ability of an individual to use a language to communicate successfully is often synonymous with the mastery of a high level of language proficiency. According to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), a very proficient user of a language should be able to "express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely" (p. 33) which indicates that individuals should be able to display both accuracy and fluency during language use. The term "language proficiency" in this study specifically refers to English language proficiency.

1.8.2   Critical thinking skills

Critical thinking skills may include an individual's ability to interpret, analyse, evaluate, infer, explain and reflect on a problem or task at hand (Facione, 1990). In general, critical thinking is believed to be useful for learning as it assists learners to achieve better understanding by actively thinking about their own learning processes and discovering ways to solve problems by evaluating different perspectives.

1.8.3   Study skills

Study skills are "academic enablers" or any tools, strategies or styles crucial for learning (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002). Common study skills include but are not limited to the following: creating mind maps, skimming, note-taking, searching for information, listening and reading in order to learn (Richardson, Robnolt & Rhodes, 2010). On the other hand, they can also be categorised as repetition-based skills, procedural study skills,

cognitive-based study skills and metacognitive skills according to Gettinger and Seibert (2002) which are explained in detail in Chapter 2.

1.8.4 Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy can be described as the ability of a learner to be responsible for his or her learning (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). However, Benson (2001) discovered much later that the development of learner autonomy can also be achieved through both independence (the learner) as well as interdependence (teachers and peers). Therefore, the researcher views learner autonomy as not simply an act of the development of learner independence through the interaction and facilitation by teachers and peers but also individual learning which involves the development of critical thinking and the application of study skills.

1.9 Structure of the thesis

This dissertation consists of 7 chapters. Chapter 1 amongst others covers the background, problem statement, research questions, objectives and significance of the study.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review which forms the foundation for this research. The challenges in English language teaching in Malaysia as well as English classrooms which include English as a Second Language (ESL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms in general are reviewed. Studies related to critical thinking skills and study skills for English language learning are also discussed in this chapter, along with the concepts of communicative competence and autonomous learning. At the end of the chapter, a conceptual framework which shows how the concepts in this study are linked and supported is presented.

Chapter 3 elucidates the research design used in this study. It rationalises the use of a grounded theory approach and further describes the procedures involved during data collection, data analysis and the steps taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the data.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the findings of this research. Chapter 4 gives a detailed account of the focus and teaching practices in English classrooms in terms of language

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