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TEACHERS' ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS TOWARDS THE USE OF STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES

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ABSTRACT: This study was conducted to examine teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards the use of Student-Centred Learning in English language classes. In addition, it also sought to examine the extent of student-centred learning practices amongst primary school teachers have on their students' performance in the English language. A survey was carried out to collect data from 147 primary school English language teachers in Perlis. The questionnaires were used to determine the teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards student-centred learning and to measure the extent teachers practice or attempt to practice student-centred learning in their classrooms. The results for March Test and mid-term examinations were also collected from 346 respondents of Year Five students to determine the relationship between student-centred learning practices and the students' achievement. The findings of this research showed that there were positive attitudes of the English language teachers towards student-centred learning. However, the teachers employ both student-centred and teacher-centred learning strategies in teaching English language for the primary school. Apart from that, the findings also revealed that there was a positive relationship between student-centred learning practices and students' achievement in the English language subject but the relationship was a weak relationship. As such, recommendations were proposed in terms of improving teacher training and future research to investigate further on student-centred learning practices in Malaysia.

KEYWORDS: Teachers' attitudes and beliefs, Student-centred learning, English language.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers play an important role in encouraging students to be more proficient in English in order for the students to compete in the globalised world (Phan Le Ha, Joyce Kho, & Brendan Chng, 2013). The Malaysia education system also stresses on the English language acquisition among students where there are many changes that have been done in order to raise the English literacy level of the students. The issue of how to improve the standard of English proficiency among young learners has been one of the most discussed in Malaysia. Learning English, as envisaged in the English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum, should be fun and pupil-centred (Juliana Othman, 2010).

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

The Ministry of Education launched the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (Ministry of Education, 2012) whereby the Blueprint reaffirms the implementation of the new standard curriculum in the primary and secondary schools in 2011. As for the English language, there is an additional time allotted both for primary and secondary schools.

The Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR) was wholly designed by the Ministry of Education to be implemented by teachers. It was introduced to promote pedagogies that emphasize student-centred approaches in the new primary school curriculum. In terms of English language teaching within KSSR, the Malaysian government put great emphasis on the importance of preparing students to be proficient in the English language to enable them to communicate effectively with people from other countries (Ministry of Education, 2011).

As such, teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards student-centred learning are very important in ensuring that the aims of the curriculum especially for English language learning are achievable. In fact, research studies conducted in Thailand by Nonkukhetkhong, Baldauf, and Moni (2006) and Prapaisit De Segovia and Hardison (2008) found that due to lack of knowledge of the student-centred approach, teachers tend to implement it as they understood it. Interestingly, according to Kumaravadivelu (1991) and Nunan (1989), the curriculum specifications and what teachers claimed took place in their classroom might be far from reality in actual classroom practices. This could be due to various reasons such as teachers' confusion of what was expected from the curriculum (Tudor, 1996), or contextually inappropriate approaches being imposed on the teachers (Holliday, 2005). In the Malaysian teaching context, Ali (2003) found that overemphasis on examination results, minimum exposure to the target language and teachers' lack of English language proficiency and training inevitably had led the teachers in his study to abandon altogether the student-centred principles behind language teaching envisaged in the curriculum.

Various studies were carried out on the attitudes of teachers on the application of student-centred learning. Ebert-May, Derting, Hodder, Momsen, Long, and Jardeleza (2011) indicated that there were situations where the teachers might think that they were using student-centred approaches but in fact they were still using teacher-centred pedagogy. Weimer (2013) stated that classroom observation showed that teachers continued to be lecture-focused even after attending workshops on student-centred method.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student-centred learning for Primary Teaching in Malaysia

According to Melor Md Yunus and Nur Dalila Mohd Arshad (2015), student-centred learning was first recognized in 1990 when 'Self Access Learning' was introduced in Malaysia in primary school and in 1995 in secondary school in the English subject. However, the implementation was never encouraging since the Malaysian Education system has been exercising 'the spoon feeding' system; passing down knowledge to their learners without much student involvement (Thang & Azarina, 2007).

Learning English according to the Malaysian primary school curriculum should ensure that pupils would acquire basic linguistic knowledge and skills through learner-centred and activity-oriented teaching-learning strategies. Juliana Othman (2010) conducted a study on the current instructional strategies used by English teachers in the Malaysian primary schools in helping their pupils to acquire English language skills. The results of the study reflected the implementation of the student-centred learning in the Malaysian primary schools. However, in another study conducted by Rosniah Mustafa, Idris Aman, Nor Diyana Saupi, and Noorizah Mohd Noor (2014) indicated a contrary. According to their study, teacher clearly appeared dominant in the classroom and students had fewer opportunities to speak than the teacher. Based on their own analysis, it was found that both teacher and students were either not practising or only partially practising the student-centred learning activities as proposed by the Ministry of Education of Malaysia. Teaching and learning did not seem to be student-centred; instead, the teacher was seen to play a dominant role. As such, it seemed that there were some challenges to this method of learning where student-centred learning activities took a lot of time to be carried out (Ernest Lim Kok Seng, 2014).

Cooperative Learning as a Preferable Approach in Practicing Student-Centred Learning Activity in English Language Classes

Student-centred learning is an approach not a methodology; it is not a step by step guide but rather a way of teaching based on a set of principles and attitudes which had aspects in common with other teaching

approaches (Alexandria, 2013). Student-centred learning is based on the philosophy that the student is at the heart of the learning process (Machemer & Crawford, 2007; Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003; Boyer, 1990). Attard et al. (2010) further stated that innovative teaching, team learning also known as cooperative learning, problem-based learning and student self-regulated learning are the possible approaches in applying student-centred learning.

According to Seid Mohammed (2015), cooperative learning encourages active participation in genuine conversations and collaborative problem-solving activities in a classroom. Echevarria and Vogt (2010) suggested that English Language students needed to be actively engaged 90-100% of instructional time to realize academic success. Seid Mohammed (2015) further stated that cooperative learning provided maximum opportunity for meaningful input and output in a highly interactive and supportive environment. The group work or pair work was indeed beneficial to the students as it promoted collaboration among students (Ernest Lim Kok Seng, 2014).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher intended to find out teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards student-centred learning and the extent of student-centred learning practices among English language teachers in Perlis. A survey was carried out to collect data from 147 primary school English language teachers in Perlis. The questionnaires were used to determine the teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards student-centred learning and to measure the extent teachers practice or attempt to practice student-centred learning in their classrooms. The results for March Test and mid-term examinations were also collected from 346 respondents of Year Five students to determine the relationship between student-centred learning practices and the students' achievement.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

Results of the study revealed that there was a positive attitude of the English language teachers towards student-centred learning but the teachers had both student-centred and teacher-centred learning beliefs in teaching English language for primary school students. Other than that, the findings also revealed that there was a positive relationship between student-centred learning practices and students' achievement but the relationship was a weak relationship.

Table 1 showed the demographic of the respondents. Majority of the respondents are females. Many of them hold a Degree; have more than 10 years of teaching experience and are teaching both level one and two English language classes.

Table 1 Demographic information of the respondents

No.	Gender	Frequency	Percent	Mean	SD
1.	Male	41	27.9	1.72	.450
2.	Female	106	72.1		
No.	Education	Frequency	Percent	Mean	SD
1.	Diploma	35	23.8	1.80	.482
2.	Degree	107	72.8		
3.	Master	5	3.4		
No.	Experience	Frequency	Percent	Mean	SD
1.	2-10 years	26	17.7	3.51	.780
2.	>10 years	20	13.6		
3.	More than 10 years	101	68.7		
No.	Option	Frequency	Percent	Mean	SD

1.	Option	119	81.0	1.19	.394
2.	Non option	28	19.0		
No.	Level taught	Frequency	Percent	Mean	SD
1.	Level one	72	49.0	1.69	.757
2.	Level two	49	33.3		
3.	Both levels	26	17.7		

The importance of teachers' teaching beliefs and attitudes

The findings of the study revealed that English primary school teachers in Perlis have exposed students to some elements of student-centred learning approach. It appears that when student-centred learning is used, students are actively engaged in the learning process. As such, beliefs are the guidance of action. Teachers' beliefs influence their goals, teaching materials, patterns of classroom interaction, their roles, classroom practices, etc. Therefore, updating the teaching beliefs is the prerequisite of instructional innovation (Mei-Hui Lin, Tsai-Fu Chuang, & Han-Pin Hsu, 2014). Teachers have to update and renew their beliefs and adopt new teaching model that is the student-centred learning practices to meet the current demand in teaching and learning process.

In addition, this study also reveals that primary school English teachers have positive attitudes towards cooperative learning. The benefit of having positive attitudes towards student-centred learning practices is that when students work together in groups they feel that they can depend on others for help and this gives them the confidence to solve problems and enjoy learning. According to Nima Farzaneh (2014), positive attitudes on student-centred learning approaches may indirectly change the students' attitude towards language learning and encourage students' interest.

The importance of student-centred learning practices

By practicing student-centred learning activities, the process of self-learning is developed and it encourages a deeper understanding and promotes higher thinking skills process by involving in the group work activity and independent learning. In student-centred learning, teachers act more like facilitators whose role is to help students use their own actual experiences and relate them to their learning. Learning then becomes more meaningful as students can relate their experience to the new knowledge (Ernest Lim Kok Seng, 2014). Ernest Lim Kok Seng (2014) further states that the student-centred learning approaches also enhance the development of skills in critical and analytical thinking that seem to be better developed than in the traditional setting. These learning approaches will promote education system for a sustainable future with a similar goal on improving academic and higher-order thinking skills to foster meaningful learning for the future and for life.

The challenges in practicing student-centred learning

Besides determining the research questions as stipulated in this study, it was also revealed that there were some challenges in practicing student-centred learning in English language classes for primary schools in Perlis. These challenges seemed to affect the teachers' beliefs, attitudes and practices of student-centred learning among English language. The main challenges in implementing student-centred learning activities in English language classes were identified as follows:

Lack of knowledge and skills

Based on the findings of this study, the teachers are found to be lack of knowledge and skills in implementing the student-centred learning practices in their classroom. Shihiba (2011) suggests that teachers' attitudes,

beliefs and understanding of the student-centred learning greatly influence how teachers organise their classrooms, their choice of strategies or activities and their interaction with the pupils. Positive attitudes but limited understanding of what the student-centred learning principles require will thus have implications for classroom learning. If teachers are not provided with enough support during the implementation phase to adapt to and accept the changes, it is more likely to cause disaffection and policy failure (Brain, Reid & Boyes, 2006; O'Donnell, 2005; Orafi & Borg, 2009). In addition, Jan Hardman and Norhaslynda A-Rahman (2014) pointed out that curriculum innovation that is the shift from teacher-centred learning to student-centred learning cannot be enacted unless teachers are supported in developing their pedagogical content knowledge and finding new ways of presenting subject content and interacting with their pupils in whole class, group-based and one-to-one situations.

Syllabus coverage

Another challenge in implementing the student-centred learning activities in English language classes based on the findings of the study is the syllabus coverage. According to Froyd and Simpson (2010), whether teachers can cover the content of the syllabus with student-centred learning approaches or can be covered with traditional lecture-based approaches depend on the individual teacher. Although some teachers indicate that they cover as much or most content with teacher-centred learning approaches, some proponents of student-centred learning approach indicate that they now cover less content than when they exclusively lectured, but that students are learning more. In other words, although students learn less content due to student-centred learning, they learn effectively. Hence the most important thing in the learning process is the quality and not the quantity.

Students' readiness

In this study, there were also some students who were not ready to participate in cooperative learning activities. Students are at first unclear and uneasy with the approach, but with the teacher guiding, and giving clear direction and instruction, students are able to lead their own learning. Besides that, students developed a higher level of understanding and enjoyed student-centred learning (Satterfield, 2015).

4. Class size

In this study, the teachers consider the size of the class as one of the restraining factors in practicing student-centred learning in the English language classes. However, the study carried out by Ernest Lim Kok Seng (2014) revealed a contrary. He argued that large classes did not pose a problem to the teacher in carrying out student-centred learning activities as mostly, student-centred learning will have activities in pairs or in small groups. As such, the only difference of a large class is, it will have more groups.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings of this study, there are several conclusions and recommendations which may shed a light on the approaches of learning and teaching English language in primary schools.

Teachers' attitude towards student-centred learning in teaching and learning of English language has a significant impact in shaping the attitude of students towards learning of English language. Students' positive attitude can be enhanced by the teachers' positive attitude towards teaching of English language and this can be done through teachers' helpful behaviour, resourcefulness, enthusiasms, good method of presentation, concern for students and teacher knowledge of the subject matter. Thus, it is recommended that teachers regularly develop positive attitudes towards student-centred learning in teaching of English language.

This study also showed that teachers are struggling in practicing student-centred learning activities in their English language classes as they are not clear of the 'underlying apparatus' of student-centred learning. Therefore, it is recommended that an immediate action to raise the level of training and professionalism of

the teachers particularly on arriving at a clear definition of the nature of student-centred approaches are expected to be implemented; then, there will be more room for variability of interpretation and practice. This recommendation is also supported by Jan Hardman and Norhaslynda A-Rahman (2014) that teachers are key players in successful curriculum implementation and teaching innovation.

The study discloses that there is a positive relationship between student-centred learning practices and students' achievement. As such, in order to encourage high achievement in English language, it is recommended that teachers structurally plan their teaching and learning activities in order to maximize the practice of student-centred learning activities in their daily lessons. Nima Farzaneh (2014) in her findings suggested that cooperative learning approach be employed for skills like reading comprehension because cooperative learning collect suggestions and ideas from different group members and helps the understanding of concepts become easily clear.

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