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Expertise in the classroom: The multiple roles of master teachers in Malaysia

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study that investigated the roles played by master teachers of the English language in Malaysian secondary schools. The Ministry of Education based on their qualifications, expertise, selects master teachers; experience as well their literacy in ICT (Information technology). This appointment as a master teacher is a privilege and not a right. Hence the question is, how different are master teachers from 'general Teachers? Further, in terms of classroom discourse, how is this difference manifested? Based on a research design that incorporated ethnography and applied discourse analysis, three master teachers were selected and observed during formal teaching hours as well as outside the classroom. Interviews were also conducted with the teachers as well as other stakeholders, namely the students and school administrators to triangulate the data. Additionally, documents were then collected and perused. The data went through a four-step analysis. The findings revealed that these master teachers design their classroom pedagogy based on their beliefs in learning. Hence, while the three master teachers are 'experts', the manifestation of their best practices is not exactly the same.

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1. Introduction

As social and linguistic demographics of today’s schools change in tandem with the changing demands of the world, teachers and school authorities in Malaysia and around the world are reacting with vigor to introduce new mechanisms to improve and enhance the teaching - learning outcomes. As early as 1993, the Malaysian Ministry of Education recognized the need to revisit the scheme for the teaching profession to address the need to empower teachers with the professional status that will reflect their contributions. Hence, the Master Teachers (Guru

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Cemerlang) scheme was born with very stringent conditions. According to the guidelines published in 2007, an applicant must have the right personality, possess knowledge and skills, be able to expand the learning outcomes of students (work culture), possess excellent communication skills, exhibit potential (visionary, proactive with initiative), and finally, to be able to contribute to the nation’s development in the field of education. It is apparent that a wholesome, global player is required. Apart from the stated requirements, an applicant must also satisfy several technical requirements that include an excellent prior service record, teaching area of expertise and being granted approval from her superiors (Hapidah, 2001). Nevertheless the question is, how do master teachers differ from ‘normal’ teachers in their practices? Would experience and qualifications make a master teacher?

2. Statement of Problem

Effective teaching is the concern of both expert and novice teachers. The success of any teaching and learning process depends heavily on how a teacher conducts her lessons. While teachers may be aware of many learning and pedagogical theories, such theories do not guarantee best classroom practices. Effective teaching, according to Lilia and Abdullah (1998, in Hapidah 2001), is a long process and encompasses life-long learning. But where do teachers turn to for guidance? Do teachers have access to state of the art literature on teaching and learning? Loughran (2010) claims that “To date, most of the writing about teachers’ professional knowledge has been by academics for academics. There has not been a tradition of teachers talking about their knowledge of practice in quite the same way as that of some other professions (p.ix)”. The same issue was also the concern of Tsui (2003), who stressed that expertise in the classroom has long being ignored despite the fact that educational experts exist with the same qualities as in other professions. A major contribution of Tsui’s study to this work is her acknowledgment of just how crucial context is to the manifestation of expertise. This is not to be ignored as the master teachers who are the foci of this study are master teachers of English language, a second language in Malaysia, whose currency appears to be declining. Hence this study aims to address this question: What are the best practices of master teachers in the teaching of the English language in Malaysia?

3. A Brief Literature Review

3.1. English language teaching in Malaysia

English language teaching in Malaysia has undergone many changes over the last five decades. These changes reflect the changes in administrative policies emanating from issues of nations and nationalism post 1957 Independence from the British. In the 10th chapter of Globalization of Language and Culture in Asia, Gill, Nambiar, Noraini and Tan (2011) offer a lucid account of the concerns that led to changes in language policy in education, albeit up to 2011. Such concerns include the formation of a new world order, of the demands of the information technology revolution, of education systems producing global citizens equipped for the knowledge economy and more importantly of language as economic commodities and not mere linguistic capital. Hence in 2003, the teaching of Mathematics and Science was conducted in the English language amidst support and criticisms. In 2012 the policy was reversed again and the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English was terminated.

Let us turn to the teaching of the English language subject. In our school system, the English language remains a subject to be learned, but not a pre-requisite to pass. Hence, it is not a surprise that there is abundant literature on the marginalization of the English language that has led to a decline in proficiency and competence among school children. It is against this backdrop that the master teachers of this study are investigated.

3.2 Master teachers in Malaysia

Despite the introduction of the master teachers’ scheme in 1993, not many studies have been conducted on it. In 2008, Marlini embarked on a qualitative study that aimed at uncovering how master teachers teach Mathematics. Using only three interview (one face-to-face and two by emails) but supported by document perusal, she found that these skilled and qualified teachers problematized their teaching (Tsui, 2003), fostered engagement with their students, and planned their classes. Perhaps a weak point of this research was the absence of observations as a tool
of inquiry that would have provided the evidence for the findings. On the other hand, Ng (2009) investigated how master teachers created thinking classrooms through a case study of four teachers from different science disciplines. She employed questionnaires, prolonged observations and interviews. Her case subjects were also given a notebook to log in their reflections, thought and comments. In analysing the data, a multiple comparative method was employed. The findings showed that despite all these science teachers are master teachers, their practices in developing the thinking classroom are not the same. The differences are interestingly as they are driven by the subjects’ personal beliefs and approaches to teaching.

Lyla (1997) focused on two-master teachers and their pedagogical practices in the ESL (English as a second language) reading class. She focused on the beliefs, decisions and practices of her subjects. As Lyla employed a qualitative research design that alludes to observe and collect’, she was able to get a thick description of what happened in the classroom as Ng (2009) did. In both cases, the findings showed contradictions between the teachers’ beliefs and their classroom behaviour in relation to the learners and the role of teachers. On a different vein, Hapidah (2001) employed a quantitative study into the master teachers’ cognitive processes and their impact on teaching. To this end, she formulated a Thinking Model for master teachers, which among others showed that years of teaching, subject specialisation and experience are not strong indicators of master teachers. Instead, the context in which the learning takes place (the ecology of the school, students, educational system, parental engagement and the like) influences the master teachers.

As a final note to this section, it is pertinent to see that in some ways, the criteria imposed on applicant to be master teachers bear some semblance to the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) criteria of experts as well as to Tsui’s (2003) of expertise in the classroom. The gap in knowledge here is on master teachers of the English language and how they cope in an environment that may not be that conducive to their goal.

3.3 Ethnography and discourse analysis

This study is motivated by what Wilkinson and Silliman (2000) stated in that, “To a great extent, the language used by teachers and students in classrooms determines what is learned and how learning takes place.” In order to capture the actual language used, in-situ observations were carried out to yield useful and valuable insights into the best practices of language teaching. Hence this study takes a qualitative approach, employing ethnographic tools of inquiry, namely that of ‘ask, observe and collect’, though not necessarily in that order. As the second researcher, a master teacher, who is familiar with the culture of the context, collects the data through non-participant observation, it is thus not the case of an outsider trying to make meaning of the context as in all other ethnographic studies as shown by Geertz (1973), Denzin (1978), Creswell (2008), to name a few. Further, as the ethnographic tradition does not traditionally record and analyse verbatim transactions; it is deemed necessary to locate an approach to discourse analysis that would do so. Hence the applied discourse analysis approach undertaken is conversation analysis a position supported by Atkinson, Okada, and Talmy (2011).

4. Research Design

As a qualitative study involves a naturalistic and interpretive approach (Merriam 2009), the first task was the identification of the context. Through a networking of friends, the second researcher located five master teachers who initially agreed. As the research procedures were explained, access to the site of inquiry became a problem. This is not unexpected because the study involves observations and interviews as well as perusal of documents. Further inevitably the school also becomes the object of study and school authorities do not encourage this. Hence three female master teachers volunteered as participants for the study: Miss M, Miss R and Miss L. They are all graduates from Malaysian universities, and in terms of a brief profile, they are as follows: Miss M is a fifty year old senior teacher in a premier school with a degree in ELS and 28 years of teaching experience. Miss R is forty three year old Malay, graduated in ELS but took up a masters in literature in English. Finally, Miss L is a forty five year old Indian who graduated in Malay letters, trained in teaching English and then did masters in ELS.

Once the permission was granted the second researcher planned the classroom observations and managed to get three observations per case study. However, before the observations, the researcher also planned visits to the school to observe the setting as well as to talk to the teachers, students and the school administration. Informal interviewing
was also conducted with the students after the lessons. At times, prior to the lessons, the second researcher would go to the schools and talk to the teachers about the lesson plans and activities. At other times, the interviews were mere chats that were done to ‘see the person behind the teacher’. The researcher is mindful that this is humanistic inquiry and with much at stake, much care was placed in the data collection process.

As it was not easy to go to the schools due to institutional constraints the observations took about four months to complete. The observations were audio recorded and transcribed. The researcher also took Field notes. During this time the interviews were conducted and the documents were also collected and perused. Hence the primary data were from the observations (transcriptions and field notes) and triangulated with the interview and documents.

Once the data were collected, the process for data analysis followed a four-step procedure. Firstly, a case study database for each master teacher was developed. Coding through a macro and microanalysis followed this. Many qualitative researchers would agree that coding is a recursive process, and according to Merriam (2009), this is the preliminary stage to theme construction. And from there, emergent themes will be identified. In this study, coding was done in two stages: open and focus. While open focused on “…. naming and categorizing of phenomena through examination of data” (Strauss and Corbin 1990, p. 62), focus coding was attempted to classify the codes into more specific categories. This was done for each case (within case analysis), which then led to cross case analysis. In order to verify the data, triangulation process was carried out between the primary data (field notes and lesson transcriptions) to the interviews and documents.

5. Findings and Discussion

This study reveals that the three case studies are similar in one respect. They are enthusiastic about teaching; they are approachable, comfortable to talk to and did not have any outward signs of being concerned about the observations. They are also very adaptable as evidenced from the fact that they do not have a fixed classroom to teach English. The three teachers had to rotate their classes with each master teacher having to shuttle between two classes. Nevertheless these experienced teachers took it all in their stride and were rather cheerful about it and attributing it to institutional constraints.

On improving English proficiency, Miss M is of the opinion that her students’ interest in reading and their reading skills need to be improved. This is not surprising as she is passionate reader and is very happy to head the Resource Room. In her school cubicle, there are many thank you and congratulatory cards neatly arranged on a soft board. She plans her own activities for her students, has led the writing of modules for the English classes and with a small team, she has also prepared the literature component for her students.

As Miss M is passionate about literature, she has turned literature classes into drama project, breathing life into the texts. She believes that drama is not about being on-stage, but an activity that will boost the students’ confidence and which allows opportunities for incidental public speaking. As reading-into-writing is a weakness of her students, she is also leading an action research to improve on the writing skills of the students. As the Head of English panel, she would spend hours preparing materials not just for herself but for collective use, but she laments that at times this was not well received. In an interview she shares her principle in teaching, “The way to achieve work is through the mind, the way to reach people is through the heart.”

Miss R also holds an administrative position, and while she is not that chatty, she comes across as a good listener. As in the case of Miss M, Miss R also prepares her own materials for class, and does not depend on the school materials only. In class, Miss R shows that she knows all her students, which is admirable because the large size of Malaysian classrooms.

As her motto is “Practice makes perfect”, she has made it mandatory for her students to keep a journal that is submitted at the end of each week on Friday and returned on Monday. The journal entries are not decided for her and hence that freedom provides for a range of topics that are not covered by the syllabus. Students enjoy this and she in turn gets ‘a peek’ into the private lives of her students. She also makes it mandatory for students to take turns to give a spontaneous speech in front of the class before lessons.

Unlike Miss M and Miss R, Miss L has been assigned the last class in the form. As she has to tackle the weak students, she turned to technology to put fun into teaching. Like Miss M, she believes in improving the student’s literacy but these weak students are rather inattentive and distracted. Hence, she prepares slides and power points and encourages the students to seek information from the Internet for class work. Her motto is, “Learning is Fun.”

In all the cases, the teacher with a Meta statement set the tone of the class and the discourse is very much that of the Initiation-Response-Feedback type. At the end of the lesson, all three would synthesize from the students the
day’s lessons so that they are meaningful. Miss R engages her students through prompting and incidental correcting.

In terms of classroom management, all the three case studies played the role of teacher, manager, materials designer, and facilitator to the students as well as mentor to their colleagues.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that the three case studies of master teachers have demonstrated keen expertise in not only their teaching of their discipline but also in their professional undertaking. The impacts these teachers have are not only on the students but also their colleagues. One notes that each teacher has a motto that drives her to do her best in her work. One may conclude that these master teachers are not ordinary teachers but experts in their field.

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