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Voices from ESL Classrooms: Overcoming Challenges and Enhancing English Language Teacher Education in Malaysia

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Abstract

As frontline educators, ESL teachers possess invaluable insights into their students' needs and a profound understanding of practical pedagogical strategies. Despite their crucial role, limited research has explored their perspectives on involvement in decision-making processes and the challenges they face, particularly when navigating the tension between institutional expectations and students' needs. This study addresses this gap by examining the challenges confronted by ESL teachers and identifying areas for potential improvement in English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) within the Malaysian educational context. Through qualitative inquiry, data were gathered from ten expert ESL teachers and five ELTE administrators via semi-structured interviews. Using inductive coding in Atlas.ti and thematic analysis, several critical challenges were identified, including the pressure to deliver academic results while fostering critical thinking, adjusting to rapid technological changes, dealing with attitudes of both teachers and students, managing insufficient facilities, and coping with an exam-oriented syllabus. Additionally, participants expressed feelings of being unheard and overwhelmed by administrative tasks. The findings not only contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by ESL teachers but also offer insights into enhancing ELTE in terms of pre-service and in-service training, facilities and resources, and incorporating teachers' voices into policy-making processes. These insights pave the way for targeted interventions and foster teacher empowerment in decision-making.

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Keywords: Challenges, ESL teachers, English Language Teacher Education (ELTE), pre-service and in-service training, professional development.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) introduced the Malaysian English Language Education Reform Roadmap 2015-2025, advocating the integration of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to ensure alignment with global standards in English language education and serving as a pivotal framework for curriculum development (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2015). The roadmap prioritizes language learning improvements across education levels in Malaysia and highlights the need for teacher training enhancements, aiming for a C1 level per CEFR (Table 1).

Table 1. The English Language Education Roadmap (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 375).

The Road Map								
Pre-Service								
		Phase 1 (2015-2016)		Phase 2 (2017- 2020)		Phase 3 (2021 – 2025)		
Conditions for Reform	Lead Agency	Action	Outcome	Action	Outcome	Action	Outcome	CEFR Exit Level (2025)
Strict criteria for the selection of teacher trainees	IPGM Universities	Set strict criteria for EL teacher trainees	Strict criteria for selection set and adopted	Implement the selection criteria and monitor the implementation Assess the teacher trainees	The selection criteria were implemented and monitored; a monitoring report was submitted. The refinement of the selection criteria	Continue the use of the selection criteria	High-calibre EL teacher trainees	C1

Although introducing CEFR is deemed a positive and welcomed approach to address the gradual decline in students' language proficiency, its adoption is not devoid of challenges (Uri & Aziz, 2018). This is particularly evident when considering viewpoints related to the English teaching and learning process, introducing complexities to its implementation. Within English Language Teaching (ELT), a notable challenge arises from the absence of a dedicated platform for educators to articulate their concerns and perspectives regarding the English teaching and learning process. This deficiency has led to the underrepresentation of teachers' current struggles and concerns in the existing literature (Mohamed, 2015; Rashid et al., 2017). Consequently, it is crucial to thoroughly discover ESL practitioners' perspectives, examine the challenges confronting ELT and ELTE, and explore potential avenues for improvement.

In this article, our overarching aim is to enhance the discourse on the teaching dilemma by shedding light on the voices and perspectives of teachers concerning the current state of English language teaching and ELTE programs in Malaysia. We intend to highlight the challenges and issues faced by the field while also pinpointing potential areas for improvement. ESL classrooms are often populated with students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. This diversity poses a significant challenge, requiring teachers to navigate language barriers skilfully, and address varying levels of language proficiency. These intricacies amplify the inherent troubles of teaching English through the lens of Threshold Concepts (Land et al., 2005; Meyer & Land, 2003), compelling educators to formulate effective strategies to overcome these obstacles. The difficulties encountered in ELT highlight educators' multifaceted challenges, and

recognizing these challenges is the initial step in addressing them. Hence, the primary objective of this research is to explore the perspectives of expert ESL teachers and ELTE administrators on the existing challenges and issues in the field of ELT and identify areas for potential improvement. This research can provide meaningful perspectives and recommendations to inspire positive transformations in ELTE across regions. This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What challenges do ESL teachers face in the field of ELT in Malaysia?
2. What are the areas for improvement in English teacher education in Malaysia?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Challenges in ESL Teacher Education

Numerous studies have been conducted worldwide on English teachers' professional development efforts, strategies, and initiatives (Al-Bargi, 2021; Alhassan, 2021; Alruqi & Alharbi, 2022; Chandran et al., 2022; Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Dewan et al., 2022; Jamrus & Razali, 2021; Kho & Mathew, 2024; Omar et al., 2019; Prabjandee, 2019; Qadhi & Floyd, 2021; Rosli & Mohd Radzuan, 2020; Salleh & Hatta, 2019). These studies have also found conflicts, issues, and inadequate support hindering the implementation of planned professional development programs (Gill & Berezina, 2020; Mansor et al., 2019; Omar et al., 2019; Sathappan & Gurusamy, 2019). The curriculum design for ESL teacher education in Malaysia aims to be progressive, but it faces significant limitations in practice (Dewan et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2020). For one, the curriculum is still rooted in rigid teaching methods and has limited flexibility to adapt to changing linguistic realities (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Prabjandee, 2019). According to Bhatt (2021), many teaching programs still use traditional transmission-based learning models, which do not adequately prepare future teachers for communicative, learner-centred classrooms. There is still a noticeable gap between what is taught and the actual needs of ESL learners, especially when educators are expected to work with diverse, non-native English speakers (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Omar et al., 2019).

Practicum experiences, designed to bridge theoretical knowledge and practical classroom application, are increasingly inadequate due to insufficient teaching time, lack of support from mentor teachers and school administrators, and limited guidance from supervisors (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Karim & Abbas, 2024). Moreover, Kabilan et al. (2020) highlighted that the practicum period may not be enough to expose teachers to teach in a diverse, multicultural, and multilingual setting. Without sufficient support or infrastructure, many preservice teachers were underprepared for these new demands, highlighting the inadequacy of current practicum models to equip teachers with the skills necessary for navigating physical and virtual classrooms (Chandran et al., 2022). Wang and Wang (2023) advocated for a more balanced approach, integrating both self-directed and guided professional development for ESL teachers.

2.2 In-Service Teacher Training: Addressing Professional Development Needs

Professional Development (PD) for in-service teachers is considered an effective tool to address the immediate needs of the teachers (Al-Abri & Mydin, 2021; Alhassan, 2021; Al Ofi, 2022; Alruqi & Alharbi, 2022; Kohnke, 2021; Prabjandee & Fang, 2022; Razak et al., 2023; Salleh & Hatta, 2019; Sokel, 2019; Vadivel et al., 2021). While these programs are crucial for professional growth, their structure and delivery often fail to address the practical realities of teaching. Avillanova and Kuswandono (2019) and Al Ofi (2022) criticized the top-down nature of many professional development (PD) programs, which focus more on policy implementation than on improving teachers' classroom practices. Rosli and Mohd Radzuan (2020), Al Younus (2023) and Saud and Mahara (2024) mentioned that English teachers face numerous obstacles, including heavy workloads, limited financial resources, inadequate access to development opportunities, and resistance to change.

In addition, [Cirocki and Farrell \(2019\)](#), [Kohnke \(2021\)](#), [Qadhi and Floyd \(2021\)](#), and [Vadivel et al. \(2021\)](#) suggested that institutions should prioritize more collaborative, informal, and context-specific PD activities that align with teachers' practical needs and are more sustainable ([Prabjandee & Fang, 2022](#)). In Malaysia, PD programs prioritize compliance with government policies over addressing teachers' day-to-day challenges in diverse and evolving classrooms ([Salleh & Hatta, 2019](#)). Moreover, in-service training often overlooks the specific needs of teachers in rural or disadvantaged areas ([Behak et al., 2021](#); [Hu et al., 2020](#)). Teachers are expected to rely on self-directed professional development to fill the gaps left by formal programs ([Bhatt, 2021](#); [Omar et al., 2019](#)). [Bhatt \(2021\)](#) noted that teachers in under-resourced areas have had to turn to self-initiated learning strategies, such as action research, peer collaboration, and digital tools, to advance their professional development. While these strategies are effective for some, relying on self-directed learning without adequate institutional support places an undue burden on teachers, particularly those already working in challenging environments.

2.3 Recent Pedagogical Models of ESL Teacher Education

Reflective practice and experiential learning are increasingly considered essential pedagogical models in ESL teacher education ([Kho & Mathew, 2024](#); [Ramdani & Gao, 2024](#); [Nurkamto & Sarosa, 2020](#); [Zhiyong et al., 2020](#)). Reflective practice encourages teachers to analyse their classroom experiences, driving professional growth critically ([Bhatt, 2021](#); [Nurkamto & Sarosa, 2020](#)). However, as [Prabjandee \(2019\)](#) pointed out, its implementation often lacks depth, leaving teachers to follow rigid, plan-oriented teaching routines with limited critical evaluation of their teaching practices ([Nurkamto & Sarosa, 2020](#)). Similarly, experiential learning, which allows educators to learn by doing, faces challenges in teacher training programs.

One possible way to overcome such shortcomings is to reimagine reflective practices through the threshold concepts framework (TCF), introduced by [Meyer and Land \(2003\)](#), which provides a deeper lens for understanding professional development in ELT. Threshold concepts transform a teacher's career, marking significant cognitive shifts that enhance pedagogical effectiveness. Although valuable, these concepts are often troublesome, involving difficult yet essential knowledge, such as navigating complex classroom dynamics and adapting to technological advancements ([Meyer & Land, 2005](#)). This idea resonates with the evolving nature of ESL classrooms, where educators must continuously adapt to innovations like communicative language teaching and content and language instruction (CLIL), often finding these changes challenging to implement. Moreover, motivating students remains a persistent issue because fluctuating learner engagement intensifies teachers' difficulties. The community of practice (CoP) theory, developed by [Wenger \(1998\)](#), aligns with threshold concepts by emphasizing the role of social interaction in professional learning. CoP highlights the importance of collaboration and shared experiences in fostering professional growth, allowing teachers to address challenges and enhance their teaching strategies collectively ([Wenger & Wenger, 2015](#)). Together, reflective practice, experiential learning, and threshold concepts, when viewed through the framework of CoP, offer a comprehensive approach to professional development in ELT, highlighting the interplay between cognitive transformation, practical experience, and social collaboration in advancing teaching expertise.

3. METHODS

3.1 Participants

The present study involved a total of 15 participants, comprising 10 expert teachers and five ELTE administrators. These participants were drawn from five secondary schools in East Malaysia and two teacher training centres located in East and West Malaysia. The teachers had been teaching English for 12 to 33 years and were selected based on their experience as an English

subject panel (*Ketua Panitia*) or senior teacher. Two of these teachers were appointed as Excellent Teachers (*Guru Cemerlang*) in 2018. These expert teachers were also in charge of mentoring new school teachers. On the other hand, administrators were selected from the school administrative assistants and heads of language departments. 80% of the participants were female, while the remaining 20% were male. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to respect ethical concerns and maintain anonymity. The teachers were identified as T1 to T10, and the administrators were identified as SH1 to SH5.

3.2 Instruments

This qualitative study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore expert teachers' experiences, challenges in ELT practices, and perspectives on improving teacher education. This approach allowed flexibility, enabling the researcher to adjust questions based on participants' responses and explore significant topics in greater depth. The questions were designed following the guidelines of [Cousin \(2008\)](#) and [Timmermans and Meyer \(2019\)](#), focusing on ELT challenges, current teacher education, and specific recommendations for future training. The interview protocol was validated by three expert reviewers from different higher education institutions for quality and accuracy. According to [Seidman \(2006\)](#), Semi-structured interviews provided a rigorous and comprehensive method for capturing participants' recollections and interpretations of a phenomenon over time. This approach was chosen for its ability to systematically document participants' experiences and the nuances of their lived experiences.

3.3 Data Collection

The interviews were conducted individually with ten expert teachers and five ELTE administrators over six months. The expert teachers were interviewed to gain insights into their experiences in ELT practices, particularly their teacher training and career challenges. Meanwhile, the administrators were asked about their views on teacher education, issues in ELTE, and potential improvements to help future teachers adapt to educational changes. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Participants were informed of the study's objectives to ensure they remained focused on relevant aspects of their teaching experiences. The sessions began with a briefing on the consent form and participants' rights.

3.4 Data analysis

Data from the interviews were transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti (Version 22). Using the [Gale et al. \(2013\)](#) framework method and the coding methods by [Saldana \(2013\)](#), the researcher used a mixed approach to analysis, allowing themes to be established both inductively from the experiences and perspectives of research participants and deductively from previous literature. Data analysis involves thematic analysis, which seeks to identify patterns in previous research by detecting any themes or relations in the data ([Braun & Clarke, 2019](#)). As content analysis was not the goal of the data analysis, it is significant to highlight that a single comment was given equal weight to the repeated comments of the other participants.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Challenges and Issues

Based on an analysis of the interviews with the participants, the study identified three challenges in ELT that both administrators and teachers had agreed upon, along with five issues that had specifically affected the teachers' group. Table 2 summarizes the challenges faced by the participants.

Table 2. Challenges and issues in ELT.

Challenges experienced by administrators and teachers	Issues experienced by English teachers
Pressure to produce good results and critical thinkers Adjusting to technology use Teachers' attitudes	Facilities Students' attitudes Teachers' voices are not heard Exam-oriented syllabus Overwhelmed with work-related tasks

4.1.1 Pressure to produce good results and critical thinkers

Based on data from administrators and expert teachers, the participants stated that the pressure to train students to achieve good results was the main challenge in ELT. Teachers were most affected, as they faced immense pressure from external stakeholders, such as parents and education authorities, to ensure strong academic performance. Despite efforts to prioritize student understanding and learning, the emphasis remained on achieving high grades, particularly A's and A+. Teachers were required to justify low grades or failing students to the authorities. This challenge was highlighted in T6's testimony as follows:

- (1) Parents are still waiting to see the results. And then at the end of it, I mean, um, we can say that, you know, results don't matter as long as the students pass and all this, but at the end of it, PPD, uh, your *Panitia* [Head of Panel], the results all come out again. Why did this number fail? Why no A's? Why no A+? There is a question that you must answer (T6).

Moreover, the pressure to maintain good results had diminished students' ability to assess their English proficiency. Teachers often felt compelled to award higher grades, such as band three, even when students did not merit them. This practice was driven by the desire to create a positive image on paper but did not accurately reflect the actual quality of students' English performance, as illustrated in T9's statement:

- (2) I want to say this. We, we must give them band three. Even though for us, they do not deserve to be given band three...so, yeah, no choice. We just give them band three. Yeah. Just for the sake of having a nice result on paper...doesn't really reflect the real picture of the student's performance quality. Furthermore, yeah, the quality's on paper, but in reality, it's actually very, very far [sic] (T9).

For SH1, the critical element in evaluating the effectiveness of schools' teaching and education systems was the emphasis on academic results. This perspective was reinforced by their recognition of the importance of supporting higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) in students and using effective teaching aids to foster out-of-the-box thinking. Stakeholder interviews revealed the significance of encouraging students to think beyond the norm, highlighting the value placed on academic achievement and the development of higher-order thinking skills.

These findings revealed the tension between prioritizing genuine learning outcomes and yielding to external pressures to achieve favourable academic results. The multi-level pressure to produce good results in schools sometimes undermined the actual assessment of students' abilities, creating a disparity between perceived performance on paper and actual performance.

4.1.2 Problems in adjusting to technology

Information and communication technology (ICT) has emerged as a significant challenge shared by participants, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. As classes and learning courses transitioned from offline to online, the participants reflected on teachers' difficulties in navigating online classes and adopting new online teaching and assessment methods. According to SH5, the pandemic placed considerable pressure on teachers to effectively integrate technology for teaching and learning purposes, even during the post-pandemic period. In terms of this, SH5 stated:

- (3) The challenges, uh, will go back with the technology. All right. I think the pandemic really tested our teachers, our teacher's knowledge, on how to really, uh, use technology wisely for teaching and learning. So, I think back in 2020, it was a really challenging time for our teachers. Adjusting even to the Google classroom, virtual meet like this. Yes. Something so new. Even now, I think even during the post-pandemic period, teachers still have problems with technology (SH5).

Similarly, T9 highlighted their experience of learning to use online tools such as Google Classroom and Google Forms, which had previously been unfamiliar. They also shared that both they and their mentees had faced similar challenges in adjusting to these online platforms, as they had never been exposed to online teaching methods before the pandemic. Consequently, they had to acquire new technological skills from scratch.

- (4) Some of my students, uh, the teachers, the students under me, they're not good at this, what do you call them, even like running Google classroom? They're not proficient. They're not good at this Google classroom because we have to do lots of things, even myself. I only learned about this Google classroom when we had to do online classes. Because before this, we are not exposed to any of these online tools or online teaching methods like that. Therefore, basically, we have to learn from scratch for me (T9).

Another teacher, T3, reported that they had no difficulty learning or using ICT in their lessons but noted that, depending on the school's context, student participation remained limited despite the teacher's proficiency in ICT. T3 expressed their frustration when only two students attended their online class via the Zoom application:

- (5) Um, because when we try to implement ICT, it depends on the context as well. Um, like my school, no matter how good you are with ICT, but when you try to implement that in your PDP [lesson], uh, I take an example, like during the pandemic, we were forced to use ICT. Yeah, I did. I designed the layout. I did learn all the skills. So, I tried Zoom, turned out only 2 persons [attended the class] (T3).

The challenges related to technology during the pandemic were evident in the participants' experiences, as many educators had to adapt rapidly to virtual teaching and learning environments. Teachers had to adjust to and utilize digital resources, online platforms, and multimedia tools for language instruction.

4.1.3 Teachers' attitudes

Within this theme, the teachers discussed their attitudes toward the teaching profession, while the administrators highlighted teachers' attitudes and responses to in-service training. Regarding teachers' attitudes toward teaching, T4 expressed concerns about some educators not taking the profession seriously:

- (6) Sometimes they find that teaching is easy because, you know, you have holidays. All these things lead them to look at other things, but they do not look into the possibilities. Because we are teachers, we must educate our children about life. So, there's one thing I see about our teachers: hmmm...they don't take teaching seriously. Even after going through mentoring, it's difficult to change certain teachers (T4).

SH4 shared a similar view, noting that for some individuals, becoming a teacher had not been their primary choice, and they had viewed teaching as a last-resort job to secure a stable income:

- (7) So, they joined the service, not because they want to be in the service; it'll be the last option for these people. So, rather than not having jobs, this is a job that gives you a pension. This is a job that you always have clients. Furthermore, so they join it. Furthermore, then, after a few years, they feel that, you know, the passion is not there (SH4).

Regarding the administrators' observation of teachers' attitudes toward in-service teacher training, SH5 expressed concerns about how some teachers did not appreciate the idea of being assessed or being required to sit for an exam:

- (8) But again, here we have a lot of teachers. The issue that we have is that we don't have enough trainers. All right. Then, the attitude of the teachers who were called for the course. Okay. Being asked, being forced to sit for exam. Nobody liked that idea, right? (SH5)

This statement echoed SH4's view on how some teachers had been defensive about changes to the education system:

- (9) Furthermore, another group of teachers, that is always, um, defensive, not really defensive from a negative perspective. They, they, I think because they, they don't really like change that happens. So, they feel that they, they, they wanna be [sic], to stay in their haven, a safe haven that they already have in school (SH4)

The findings suggested that certain teachers may have lacked seriousness and passion for their teaching profession, potentially viewing it as a secondary career option. These attitudes could have had implications for the overall quality of teaching and further emphasized the importance of addressing teacher motivation and commitment in the education system.

4.1.4 Other issues related to teachers

As noted above, some problems were mentioned exclusively by the teachers. The teachers' perspectives highlighted issues related to facilities, students' attitudes, the lack of teachers' voices in decision-making, exam-oriented syllabuses, and being overwhelmed with work-related tasks. Table 3 summarizes these challenges with verbatim quotes from the teachers to support the findings.

Table 3. Issues experienced by teachers.

Issues	Summary of the verbatim	Responding Participants
Facilities	Teachers highlighted challenges related to limited school facilities, such as overcrowded classrooms with as many as 50 students per class. The lack of extra classrooms for additional activities or tuition sessions was also a concern, making it difficult for teachers to provide individualized attention.	T9, T10
Students' attitudes	Teachers expressed concerns about students' discipline and attitudes toward learning. Some students neglected to bring their books and complete homework. Teachers felt restricted in implementing disciplinary measures and assigning appropriate homework due to changing educational policies. In addition, T6 also claimed, "I find that the students now you really, really have to guide them every step of the way. Um, even in their thinking". This shows that students nowadays are too dependent on their teachers.	T5, T6, T7, T10
Teachers' voices are not heard	Teachers reported a lack of effective channels through which their voices could be heard and considered in decision-making processes. Despite presenting their ideas and suggestions during assessments or presentations, feedback often did not reach higher authorities, resulting in a perceived lack of recognition and impact.	T1, T3, T9
Exam-oriented syllabus	Teachers expressed concern about the prevailing exam-oriented education system. The emphasis on exam results and meeting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) puts pressure on teachers and students. This focus on exams was seen as limiting the broader development of students' skills and knowledge.	T1, T2, T6
Overwhelmed with work-related tasks	Teachers expressed feeling overwhelmed by numerous work-related tasks and responsibilities. The large number of students per class and the presence of students with different proficiency levels made it challenging for teachers to provide individualized attention and support to all students effectively. T3 also expressed dissatisfaction with unfair task distribution: "Some teachers, they get a lot of work just because they know how to do their work, but some teachers didn't get much of work".	T5, T3

Table 3 presents the key challenges experienced by teachers, as reported through their verbatim feedback. One major issue is the lack of adequate facilities, such as overcrowded classrooms with up to 50 students and insufficient spaces for extra activities or tuition sessions, making individualized attention difficult (T9, T10). Teachers also raised concerns about students' attitudes, including poor discipline, failure to bring necessary materials, and over-reliance on teachers for guidance. Policy changes have further limited disciplinary measures and the ability to assign meaningful homework, compounding these challenges (T5, T6, T7, T10).

Additionally, teachers expressed frustration over the lack of channels for their voices to be heard in decision-making processes. Despite presenting ideas during assessments, their feedback often failed to reach higher authorities, leaving them feeling unrecognized (T1, T3, T9). Teachers were also critical of the exam-oriented education system, which emphasizes meeting KPIs and achieving exam results at the expense of broader skill development (T1, T2, T6). Finally, they reported being overwhelmed by excessive workloads, large class sizes, and unfair task distribution, which made it difficult to support students effectively (T3, T5). These issues emphasize the significant barriers to effective teaching and learning.

4.2 Areas for Potential Improvement in English Language Teaching

Following the section on the current challenges in ELT, this section presented the areas for potential improvement in ELT as suggested by the participants. Responses from the participants were categorized into four main themes: 1) pre-service training, 2) facilities and resources, 3) considerations for policymakers, and 4) in-service training (Figure 1).

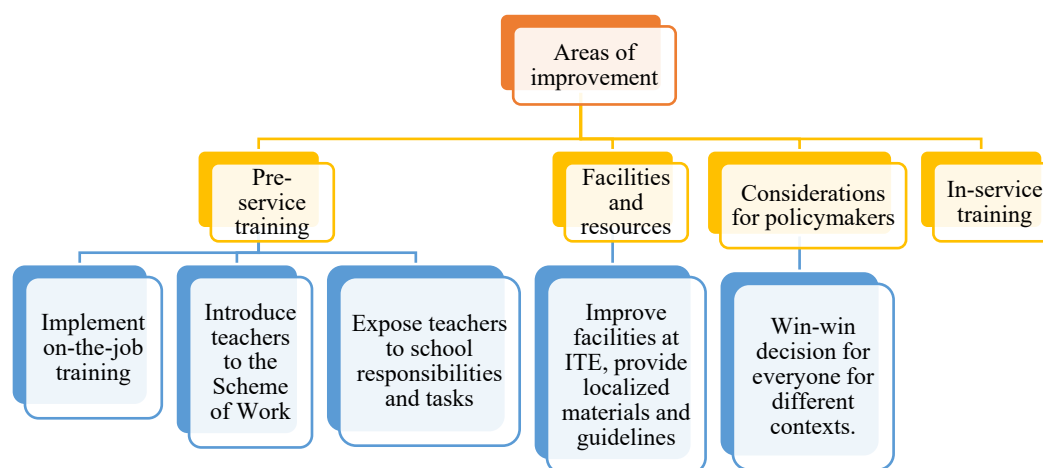


Figure 1. Areas of improvement.

4.2.1 Pre-service training

The analysis of the participants' responses revealed three subthemes related to pre-service teachers: 1) early exposure to school tasks, 2) introduction of pre-service teachers to the scheme of work (SOW), and 3) implementation of on-the-job training. For the first theme, the participants emphasized the importance of early exposure to various school tasks and responsibilities during teacher training. They argued that there was often a gap between theoretical learning in universities and teacher training colleges and the practical tasks teachers face in schools. Exposing pre-service teachers to real-world tasks, such as managing clubs, societies, and sports activities, could help bridge this gap and better prepare them for the diverse roles they may encounter as educators. Early exposure could also help reduce anxiety and stress related to non-teaching tasks, allowing teachers to be more confident and effective in handling their responsibilities. In this regard, T5 testified:

- (10) I think teachers should be more exposed to a lot of this. What is happening around school? You know, because like what you learnt and what is happening is like, there's a big gap, you know, sometimes in school you need to be KB [Head of Department], to be KP [Head of English Panel]. You need to do so many of the things which are not related to what we have learned in uni [university] or in college, right (T5).

The participants also highlighted the importance of delegating tasks fairly within the teaching profession. They expressed the need for administrators to allocate responsibilities and workload among teachers in a fair manner. The concern was that some teachers might receive excessive work, while others may receive fewer tasks. This perceived imbalance in task distribution could lead to dissatisfaction and potential detachment among teachers. Ensuring reasonable task distribution was considered crucial in maintaining a positive work environment and fostering a sense of responsibility among teachers.

Another notable finding was the lack of management training during teacher training programs. One stakeholder, SH3, emphasized that teacher training should include courses on school management, financial handling, and other administrative tasks. This would equip pre-service teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to handle various aspects of school management effectively. The absence of such training could leave teachers ill-prepared to handle non-teaching responsibilities, leading to challenges and stress when dealing with administrative duties beyond their core teaching roles.

The second theme related to introducing pre-service teachers to the scheme of work (SOW). The participants highlighted the need for better alignment between the training provided in universities or teacher training institutions (IPG) and the actual curriculums and teaching practices in schools. They noted that pre-service teachers often lacked familiarity with the specific schemes of work used in the schools they were placed in during their training. This disconnect could lead to difficulties in lesson planning and delivery because trainees might not be fully aware of the school's chosen materials, teaching sequence, and academic expectations. This misalignment may result in a less practical learning experience for both pre-service teachers and their students.

To address this issue, the participants suggested that teacher trainees should be introduced to the school's work scheme and base their lesson plans on it during their training. By doing so, the trainees would familiarize themselves with the school's actual curriculum and teaching requirements, which would better prepare them for future teaching roles. Emphasizing alignment between university-based training and the actual school context could enhance the quality of teacher preparation and improve trainees' readiness to teach in real classrooms, as stated by T6:

- (11) Yeah. So, um, perhaps these teacher trainees should, uh, when they come and teach, they should follow our SOW [scheme of work]. So, their lesson should be based on our school SOW rather than, you know, selecting what lessons to teach. Right. I feel that their lesson plans, they don't follow. It's just that they just look at the textbook. Okay, we'll just do this one because it's easier to teach. This is interesting. We're going to do this one. Right? Yeah. Very selective. Furthermore, then when they go off, we are left with the hard ones, the hard ones to catch up (T6).

The third suggestion from the participants was to implement on-the-job training. The participants also recommended incorporating on-the-job training elements into the teacher training program. They proposed a more immersive approach where pre-service teachers would spend more time in the school environment, working under the guidance of experienced mentors. This on-the-job training would allow trainees to gain practical experience and exposure to the challenges and realities of classroom teaching.

One suggested approach was to allow teacher trainees to go through extended practicum periods, during which they would work as teachers in schools, occasionally returning to the teacher training institution for input and feedback sessions. This experiential learning model would enable pre-service teachers to apply what they had learned in an educational setting, receive ongoing support from experienced mentors, and continuously reflect on their teaching practices. Such on-the-job training could help bridge the gap between theory and practice, enhancing the

trainees' teaching skills and confidence, although participants such as T8 admitted that such an approach was quite impossible to implement due to time and cost implications.

- (12) If I can have more of them in the school areas, okay. That means, uh, do on-the-job training elements, which would be really good. That means they are already in schools as teachers. They go in as teachers, but once in a while, they come out from the schools to get input from us. And then they go back to the schools, they'll try things out. Later, they'll come back again, you know, on and off on-the-job training kind of thing. Maybe we can have some sessions like that...but it's not that easy to do. I know. Uh, I'm so sorry. I'm giving you an idea, which is quite impossible (T8).

4.2.2 *Facilities and resources*

The findings highlighted the need for improvement in teacher training facilities, infrastructure, resources, and support for teaching and assessing CEFR-based lessons. Regarding facilities, the participants noted that teacher training institutions in Malaysia lacked some essential facilities. Participants such as SH3 compared teacher training institutions overseas, highlighting that these institutions were fully equipped with various facilities, such as gymnasiums and swimming pools. These comparisons suggested that specific necessary amenities and equipment were missing in these institutions, which could hinder a comprehensive and enriching learning experience for teacher trainees.

- (13) You know, sometimes we have to bring the students out, you know, why cannot we have it our own, right? Because I've seen it overseas, whereby they have everything there, they have gymnasium, they have swimming pool and everything in one college or every, in one university, something like that. Okay. Furthermore, maybe we need to improve on that. Okay. The facilities and infrastructure (SH3).

The participants also hoped that the Ministry of Education (MoE) would address the facilities and infrastructure in teacher training institutions. They emphasized the importance of upgrading and expanding facilities to create a more conducive and well-rounded learning environment for aspiring teachers.

Regarding resources, participants expressed that the lack of preparation and late provision of resources and guidelines, such as sample materials for listening and speaking assessments, created difficulties for both teachers and students. As a result, teachers faced challenges in accessing appropriate resources and support materials to teach CEFR-based lessons. They had to rely on external sources, such as the British Council, to find suitable materials for their students, indicating a lack of comprehensive resources from the Ministry of Education (MoE) and *Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia* (LPM, or the Malaysian Examinations Board). Teachers, such as T9, also expressed concerns that there could be delays in delivering materials to schools.

- (14) We are not given samples. Ah, we are not given, uh, with the samples of listening, the samples for speaking, like that. So, imagine we have to text the students and we only have the sample for the past few months like that, this year. So, leaving us with limited time to expose the students to the skills for speaking and listening (T9).

In addition, teachers encountered difficulties when using Classroom-Based Assessment (*Pentaksiran Bilik Darjah*) to assess students' progress according to the CEFR descriptors. Some students struggled to achieve the scores needed for specific CEFR bands due to weak English foundations, but to keep a good record, they had to give the students a good grade "...just for the sake of having a nice result on paper" (T9). Participants urged the MoE to better understand the challenges teachers face in implementing the CEFR and other ELT programs. They emphasized the importance of considering limitations at the grassroots level and addressing practical issues teachers face in diverse contexts.

4.2.3 Considerations for policymakers

One of the unexpected findings of this study is that there is a sense that implementing specific policies or practices may appear favourable on paper or for documentation purposes but may not effectively address the challenges faced by teachers in practice:

- (15) I will only use this one sentence, and I hope that you, uh, will get the point. You will get the message. It's only nice on paper. And how we can actually, um, improve, I would say listen to the teacher's voice because we know what is much more important compared to those who designed the so-called blueprint. Listen to the teacher's voice, then you'll see a positive impact on the education systems, rather than listening to those blueprints (T3).

The findings suggested that while specific policies or practices might have seemed beneficial on paper or in formal documentation, they might not have effectively addressed teachers' real challenges in their teaching experiences. T3's quote indicated that the key to improvement lay in truly understanding and valuing the insights and concerns of teachers themselves. This finding emphasized the importance of considering teachers' perspectives and experiences rather than relying solely on predetermined plans or strategies designed without direct input from teachers.

Moreover, the findings from the ELTE administrators' perspectives revealed essential considerations and concerns about policymakers involved in making decisions in the education system. The administrators emphasized the significance of having MoE officials with an education background to lead the policymaking process. Their views focused on several key points. Firstly, they believed that policymakers should understand the complexity of education. According to SH4, "So, you must be able to understand all the contexts because education is not clear-cut". This involved various contextual nuances and complexities that required deep understanding to make informed and effective decisions. The administrators emphasized the need for policymaking that benefited all members of the education system, not just certain groups. What might have worked with one particular group might not have worked for another.

In addition, participants urged the avoidance of the politicization of education. They stressed the importance of avoiding political influence when making education decisions. They advocated for the involvement of genuinely invested individuals in education and its improvement rather than those with political agendas. Moreover, the administrators also claimed that policymakers should have strived to make decisions that created a win-win situation for all stakeholders in education. This approach involved understanding and considering students' and teachers' diverse backgrounds, challenges, and opportunities, leading to comprehensive and balanced policies, as stated by SH4:

- (16) So, I think the person who governs it should be able to understand and embrace all the contexts to make a very good decision for everyone. So, it becomes a win-win. Um, most of the decisions made on education sometimes, it's just giving the access to certain group of people, but where others, you know, they feel like left behind.

4.2.4 In-service training

In the final section of the findings, the participants also provided valuable insights into the specific training that ELT teachers require. The critical points of the training are as follows:

a. Technology Integration

The participants emphasized the need for training in ICT to keep up with the demands of modern teaching. They expressed that technology skills were essential, especially after the experience of transitioning to online teaching during the pandemic. Teachers reported facing challenges with online tools and stressed the importance of continuously upgrading technology skills to improve teaching practices. Proper training on educational apps and software was also suggested to enhance the effectiveness of language instruction in the 21st century classroom (T1, T2, T9).

b. CEFR-Based Assessment Marking

Teachers highlighted the necessity for refresher courses on marking CEFR-based assessments. They expressed concerns about the lack of clarity in the marking guidelines, particularly in the writing assessments (T9). Some teachers reported that they rely on self-guided research through Google and YouTube to better understand the marking process. The need for standardized and comprehensive training to ensure consistent and accurate assessment was emphasized, especially given the impact of CEFR on language teaching and evaluation. T7 added, “We don’t get, uh, those kind of, uh, courses all the time and unless you are a marker, examiner”.

c. Psychology (Counselling)

Participants stressed the importance of psychological training for teachers to enhance their mental well-being and support fellow teachers and students. While schools have designated counsellors, they are not always licensed psychologists. Hence, psychology courses should be included in teacher training to help educators gain insights into mental health and counselling techniques. This will enable them to effectively address the emotional and psychological challenges faced by students and colleagues.

d. Pedagogy and Classroom Management

Pedagogy and classroom management were identified as crucial areas for teacher training. Classroom management, in particular, was emphasized as a priority because it forms the basis for effective teaching and learning. Teachers highlighted the need for strategies to handle disciplinary issues and problematic students without resorting to ineffective punishment. Classroom management skills are essential for creating a conducive learning environment and ensuring a positive educational experience for students (T3, T5).

e. Inclusive Education

Participants expressed the need for specialized training to address the needs of diverse learners, including students with reading difficulties, special needs, autism, and slow learners. Teachers reported that their initial training primarily focused on teaching regular secondary-level students, leaving them unequipped to handle the unique challenges posed by students with diverse learning needs. They suggested the inclusion of specialists in child development and specialized teachers for slow learners in schools to provide guidance and support. Pertaining to this point, T5 testified that

- (17) We were taught to teach secondary level... Yes. Normal skills, normal students. Okay. But they never taught us how to handle special kids. Yes. We have autistic children, special needs, and all of them. Autistic kids, especially. They’re a bit different from the rest, you see. Furthermore, you know, slow learners. So, we are not trained to, we don’t have any specialized skills for that. So, if we can have every school, there are one or two specialized teachers for slow learners. Maybe they can come and help us either physically or at least show us what we can do (T5).

5. DISCUSSION

One significant implication is the inclusion of teachers’ perspectives in educational reforms and policy decisions. This finding aligns with [Rashid et al. \(2017\)](#), who acknowledged that teachers must be involved early in policy development, as their insights are the gateway to effective policy execution. Experienced teachers, in particular, bring valuable perspectives shaped by practical teaching approaches in diverse classrooms. A paradigm shift toward a bottom-up approach in decision-making, particularly regarding pedagogical aspects, is recommended to bridge the gap between policy and practice, ensuring effective classroom implementation.

The findings reveal that relying solely on surveys for data collection in ELT practices may not yield a significant impact. Teachers, being central to the challenges faced, must have their voices heard (Uri & Aziz, 2018). Engaging teacher representatives in district and state-levels discussions with MoE officials and the Teacher Education Division is crucial. Teachers can be interviewed in designed focus groups in the early stages of any initiative which occurs to enhance teacher commitment and contextualize policies (Cirocki & Farrell, 2019; Kohnke, 2021; Prabjandee & Fang, 2022). Moreover, it is essential to improve communication channels between different levels of the education system to ensure that developments at the classroom level reach the highest stratum of educational administration.

Furthermore, the current findings are consistent with earlier research, including that keeping up with technological advancements and integrating them into the classroom had been challenging for teachers, especially during the pandemic era (Ag-Ahmad, 2021; Zhong, 2020). Similarly, recent studies, such as those by Seufert et al. (2021), highlight how digital technologies have reshaped classroom management, emphasizing the need for continuous professional development and adaptable classroom strategies. Sathappan and Gurusamy (2019) also noted that teachers face significant challenges in managing student behaviours and individual differences in the classroom. These observations highlight the urgent need for robust support systems, effective training programs, and practical pedagogical approaches that equip teachers with the necessary skills and strategies to effectively manage diverse and dynamic classroom environments.

Finally, the findings reveal the potential benefits of decentralization, specifically in enhancing the relevance of training programs. In Singapore, for instance, teachers are granted more decision-making freedom, leading to greater responsibility for staff development choices and skill transfer (Gill & Berezina, 2020). This calls for rethinking the current top-down structure in Malaysia to elevate the ELT ecosystem.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the critical challenges faced by English language teachers in navigating the evolving educational setting. From the pressure to achieve academic results to struggles with technology integration, these issues reflect the complex nature of teaching in a digital age. Teachers remain committed to fostering critical thinking and engaging learning environments despite persistent external pressures and an exam-oriented system. However, administrative burdens often leave them feeling overwhelmed and unheard, emphasizing the need for systemic changes. Encouragingly, both teachers and ELTE administrators advocate for essential changes, emphasizing the need for enhanced pre-service training and teacher-friendly facilities, and policy reforms guided by educators' insights. These recommendations aim to empower teachers with the skills and resources needed to address modern classroom demands and nurture students holistically.

This study acknowledges its limitations, including a small sample size and its focus on a specific context. Future research should further explore the underlying causes of administrative burdens while identifying strategies for integrating teachers' voices into policymaking. Additionally, investigating resource gaps in teacher training institutions and fostering professional learning communities (PLCs) through longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches can provide valuable insights for meaningful reform.

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