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REFLECTIVE PIECE

Exploring my dilemmas as an educator teaching English to speakers of other languages

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ABSTRACT
Teaching the English language to students from various programmes at tertiary level remains a challenging task. Most students perceive Communicative English, a compulsory course that needs to be passed to graduate, as a threat. This reflective paper aims to discuss three dilemmas that I have experienced with my English language students in this context. First, students expect that English language learning should be as fun as it was in primary school. However, the tertiary level demands that attention be paid to career development, which is somewhat discordant with this ideal. Second, students participate in class activities without engaging themselves in the learning process. Last but not least, motivating demotivated students to develop an interest in English language learning is not an easy task, especially for those students who do not enjoy learning English. The paper ultimately highlights the need for educators to constantly reflect on their practice and changing learning contexts.

Context

In this paper, I discuss my experience of teaching English Language for Diploma students aged between 18 and 23 years for the past 15 years in a suburban polytechnic in Malaysia. In the process, I seek to share the dilemmas I have faced in engaging students in the learning process. Teaching English to speakers of other languages such as Malay, Tamil, Mandarin, Hokkien, Telugu, Malayalam, etc. in a multicultural suburban context is challenging. Thus, English becomes the second, third, or even fourth language for students in this context. As someone who has been brought up in a Tamil-speaking environment and who received my primary education in a Tamil school, I can easily relate to the challenges that my students who come from different ethnicities face and the way they feel about English language learning. They start learning English in preschool and continue to do so until their pre-university studies. Research has

shown that the efforts made to provide continuous support for language learning within the family matter in the learner's development (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Moorhouse & Beaumont, 2020; Philominraj et. al., 2022). Yet, not all students have this privilege and are thus left unattended in terms of crucial language learning needs.

Purpose of paper

The aim of this reflective piece is to reflect on my experiences, as a means to contribute to the improvement of English language teaching and learning. The paper offers insights that could fuel and develop further interest in this area. It provides a self-reflection on the impacts of dilemmas I have faced as an educator, which may resonate with those of other language educators. As a practitioner, understanding students' difficulties and needs in language learning are essential.

Teaching English to speakers of other languages

English, as the global lingua franca, should no longer be treated as a foreign language (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2021; Breeze & Guinda, 2021). Many studies have highlighted the difficulties educators face in teaching English in non-native contexts (Dang & Vu, 2020; Elmahdi & Hezam, 2020). The ability to communicate in English is becoming increasingly significant in an ever-expanding digital era (Scager *et al.*, 2017). Smokotin *et al.* (2017) highlighted that:

> "… this demands a reorganization of language education based on a transition to multilingual teaching and learning in which English language teaching is envisioned not as traditional teaching of one of the national variants of English, which leads to acquiring the corresponding dominant cultures, but as teaching English as the language of world communication used for overcoming interlingual and intercultural barriers in the globalizing world" (p. 62).

They emphasise the need for a revision of the traditional approach to teaching foreign languages. Akbari and Tajik (2019) also mention that educators are mainly concerned with dilemmas raised as a result of rules and regulations. Their study suggests that future research needs to explore the nature of the moral dilemmas English language educators face in the classroom using different methodologies and in different contexts. English language teaching and learning is already a challenge in face-to-face settings in the present context but is now being further problematised in the online or hybrid mode. Students have limited access to online lessons, chiefly due to severe Learning Management System (LMS) crashes, the difficulty of online interaction with educators and classmates, a lack of experience and skills for utilising digital tools, and issues with time management when working across two learning modes (Sriwichai, 2020).

My Dilemmas

In this paper, I offer three vignettes. In the first, I discuss how students expect English language study to be as enjoyable as it was in primary school, but experience discord when their vision does not correspond with the focus on job requirements at the tertiary level. In the second, I describe how students engage in classroom activities without actively participating in the learning process. They are too worried about making mistakes and presume that their responses are not good enough to be accepted, or that they are outright wrong. Sometimes, they just join the classes to mark their attendance, and they are often occupied with other commitments or tasks during online learning. Last but not least, I discuss how inspiring demotivated students to become more interested in English language study is a challenge, particularly for students who do not enjoy studying the subject. This dilemma has led me to evaluate the relationship between my teaching approaches, behaviours, and the learning environment, rather than solely focusing on student-related factors (Zainun & Mat Noor, 2022).

Vignette 1

Students join English classes with one common expectation: English is fun. Students have become accustomed to this concept throughout their primary and secondary school days. Now, they are at the tertiary level, pursuing their diploma studies. Most of them have entered the institution with a C or D grade in their SPM examination. Although results do not always reflect real ability, the language ability acquired in in-class activities justifies the results. Unfortunately, these students are not aware that in-class activities are crucial to developing their knowledge and skills to meet the industrial demands for professional development. The context does not always allow them to take things lightly anymore, and serious attention must be paid to learning English to a high standard.

Below are some quotations derived from my class evaluation feedback forms. They reflect how students felt about learning English:

> "It's difficult".
> "I hate learning English as I'm forced to speak English in class".
> "I really feel happy to learn how to communicate in English, but I had to do a lot of work".

Educators in this context are responsible for developing students' English language proficiency and fluency, since the students will be referred to as products of the institution. Like it or not, they have to commit to learning in a not always 'so fun' environment, but I have to sustain their interest in learning English. Here is where my dilemma begins. Yes, I prepare my lessons by considering the fun elements, but the outcome of the lesson should be mapped onto the course and programme learning outcomes (Song, 2018). Students should be made aware of learning English at the tertiary level. If the English level prior to entrance is good enough, achieving the outcome is not an issue. However, now, the challenge is that I have to care for my students who are in dire need of acquiring the basic language elements taught in the school syllabus. This requires the commitment of the students. Are they ready to commit to the challenge to spend more time learning the basic and additional lessons and to complete the tasks given to develop their knowledge? If I ignore and proceed with current course needs, assuming they would improve on other language aspects themselves, I might be perceived as irresponsible. I am afraid they might conclude: English is not fun.

Vignette 2

Although students are well aware of the importance of and need for English proficiency to aid professional development, they still keep questioning the need to learn English at the tertiary level for engineering and commerce programmes:

> "Why have I to learn English?…I don't like it".
> "I don't need English, I can speak Malay at my workplace".
> "I am not confident to speak English".

Motivation and attitude towards learning English is another issue. I work with good students, but there is a general lack of motivation to learn English. However, they do not seem to take timely actions to develop their proficiency.

The switch from face-to-face interaction to an online classroom setting due to the imposition of COVID-19 lockdowns has made the situation even worse (Fahmalatif *et al.*, 2021; Kamble *et al.*, 2021). I, therefore, faced a dilemma. I do not want to punish my students for not having the right attitude towards learning the language, as many contributing factors exist. Are they in the right environment? Are they given enough exposure to the language and support from their families to maximise their learning? Yes, I agree that it is the educator's responsibility to heighten their motivation, but to what extent? As management commonly informs educators, no matter what happens, the students are always right. When then should the students develop their intrinsic motivation for their own benefit? I am enthusiastic about teaching when receiving new students every semester, hoping to do my best for them. However, when some students do not show any interest in English language learning, I feel incapable, despite the efforts I have made to achieve the lesson outcomes. An important question can therefore be

asked: Which is more important: my motivation to teach or the students' motivation to learn? What about the educators who have forced themselves to be in the profession?

Vignette 3

Classroom atmosphere and educator behaviour are contributing factors in determining the success of lessons (Khouya, 2018). However, at times, even with an awareness of these factors and a well-planned lesson (Cents-Boonstra *et al.*, 2021), the lessons turn out to be ineffective. Relating this to my classroom context, teaching and learning is quite challenging, especially in the online learning context during COVID-19. Encouraging students, especially those who have a low level of proficiency or are extremely shy to speak English is challenging, as they tend to avoid speaking, and rarely appear in the chat box, even after many requests for them to speak out loud. Although the questions are repeated many times, students remain silent without offering any responses. Even if some responses are offered, they are from the same students. According to Genc and Aydin (2017), students eventually feel demotivated and give up if they have negative attitudes toward the target language. Silence forces educators to talk more than students. The end-of-class reflection notes indicate that students are reluctant to speak due to being too shy to speak in English:

> "My English language was so bad miss :,) I'm too shy".
> "I'm weak in English. I'm shy to talk in our class".

I know my students have potential, but they lack the confidence to turn on their cameras and speak to their classmates. I do not want my students to lose their confidence in learning English. Yet, at the same time, I want them to know that they do not have enough confidence to build their language proficiency. Making them believe in their ability to use the language is a real struggle. Many factors contribute to students' lack of participation in online learning: network problems, unstable networks, shared devices, incompatible devices, responsibilities in the family, and so on (Batubara, 2021; Efriana, 2021; Lapitan Jr *et al.*, 2021; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). When a student is not responding to my questions in class or not participating in online class activities, I face a dilemma; however, I do not want to blame the student. During face-to-face classroom teaching, students get in touch with their peers and me in the classroom as well as in the online mode, using blended learning approaches (Albiladi & Alshareef, 2019; Hockly, 2018). The sense of community is stronger in such classes. However, now, with the solely online learning mode, the interaction is far less due to students being strangers throughout the semester and speaking only if forced to. Sometimes students do not even care to get to know their educators. This is embarrassing, but educators still need to cater to their student's needs, as there are rules and regulations to follow and because good teaching is ultimately about building up a learning community (Otto *et al.*, 2015). To what extent then should the educators be patient? Is it not the students' responsibility to participate in activities to learn and understand better? No matter what, customers are always right and should be treated well.

Reflections

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a game-changer for practitioners in the educational sector (Mat Noor *et al.*, 2021; Wintachai, 2021). Students' variety of learning abilities demands different approaches to the teaching and learning process. In the effort to overcome these dilemmas, I believe attention needs to be paid to increasing the amount of students talk in the English language classroom. If educators' talk continues to be dominant, especially in online learning environments, then the expected outcomes in language learning will likely not be achieved (Hope, 2017).

The 'fun' elements in English language teaching should be evaluated in tertiary-level education. Educators should encourage fun learning by increasing students' ability to think outside of the box, thus leading to creative and critical thinking (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2005). This is possible with project-based learning, where

students are connected with real-world situations in which they can see the need for developing their proficiency (Umar & Ko, 2022). They get opportunities to relate the content of the syllabus with the use of the language in the workplace.

Students' engagement in class is an essential factor for devising effective lessons (Sinatra *et al.*, 2015). If we change students' behaviours, they will participate better in class. Educators' utterances should not demotivate the students but should help them realise what they need to do to be more engaged in in-class activities. Students should be given sufficient space to voice their responses. Discussions with students should be given priority rather than making assumptions. Educators should not just request that students should complete the tasks shared on online platforms but should also scaffold students as much as possible, in such a way that information is introduced in simple terms at first and is gradually expanded upon in greater layers of complexity (Bruner, 1978). According to Bruner (1978), scaffolding refers to: "... the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom taken in carrying out some task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring (p. 19)".

By scaffolding, educators create opportunities for students to participate in the learning activities actively (Hammond, & Gibbons, 2005). Students expect closer attention, as they feel helpless, especially during online learning sessions. According to Akbari and Tajik (2019), the educator must decide between the student's personal needs and the need to obey school rules. Scaffolding approaches should be personalised according to students' needs and learning modes. I agree that collaborative learning or project/problem-based learning is not easy to implement, but it is entirely possible (Muhamad Dah & Mat Noor, 2021). Its role is more to impart skills with sufficient guidance and effective continuous assessments than to test what they have learned from exams (Muhamad Dah *et al.*, 2023).

Motivation is the key to sustainable learning (see Almulla & Alamri, 2021; Alizadeh, 2016; Sánchez-Santamaría *et al.*, 2021). According to Alizadeh (2016), motivation affects the success or failure of any complex task. Out-of-classroom hours consultations could be a way to increase students' interest in language learning. Students need to be informed about the reality and to what extent they can meet industrial demands with their current level of proficiency. Through SWOT analysis, educators may group them according to their learning needs to achieve the lesson outcomes (Jasiołek *et al.*, 2021).

In my experience, I have seen that students are constantly watching and evaluating educators through the amount of effort and genuine care they put into their language learning. I believe that the dilemmas I face are the factors for change in my teaching and learning, as I seek to inspire and increase my students' interest in English language learning. It is so satisfying to hear from the anonymous feedback and video responses that the efforts made are impacting the students in a positive way:

> "My first impression is Madam Selvamalar's effort. I have seen that when she starts the conversation she continues until the end. So I have the confidence and I do my presentation well. I feel happy because now I can talk in front of many people".
> "She's a very good lecturer. Because of her I am able to speak in public. She's a hardworking lecturer that wants to see her students' success".
> "I can see myself improving with my English when handling the activities given by the lecturer".
> "I'm really happy to learn with such a lecturer like Madam Selvamalar, and I have had many improvements in talking skills. Madam Selvamalar helped me through it to make a big difference in my personal ability".
> "I felt like the tasks given were a bit too much, but in the end, I found it very useful for my improvement".

The feedback above highlights the change of attitude and motivation among my students by the end of the course. From being shy students, in the beginning, they were able to express thoughts not only in written form, but verbally, by the end. Once the students could see the changes for themselves,

that marked the real success for me as the educator in achieving the course outcomes.

Conclusion

The dilemmas faced by an educator vary according to context. To accommodate different needs, educators have no choice other than to transform conventional teaching styles to more contemporary ones to meet the cultural expectations, ongoing development, and technological capabilities of instructors and students (Hasnan & Mohin, 2021). However, the guidelines pertaining to online teaching and learning are insufficient (Wintachai *et al.*, 2021). In the future, it is also important to note that teaching dilemmas affect the educator's professional development, and thus it is compulsory to continue reflecting on and adapting our practices according to students' learning needs and changing learning contexts (Mat Noor, 2022). In short, dilemmas direct the path for transformative change and dynamic teaching, whereby students can gradually become involved in what they are learning about in different ways (Mat Noor & Shafee, 2021).

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