

Professional Development for ESL Educators During Covid-19 Pandemic Era at Sabah's Tertiary Institutions, Malaysia

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Abstract. Technology has played a significant role in Malaysian education sector including tertiary institutions during Covid-19 Pandemic. All educators including those who teach English as Second Language (ESL) are able to continue classes during this difficult time through various online platforms such as Google Meet, MS Teams, Zoom and others. This phenomenon undoubtedly demands skills which would enable language educators to effectively incorporate the use of technology and the inculcation of 21st Century skills in their classrooms. In order to support these educators to embrace these different skills, additional training such as professional development programmes is needed. This literature review will canvass the challenges and opportunities of English Language Teaching in terms of preparation experiences of ESL educators for teaching and learning in 21st Century as well as the benefits and challenges of conducting professional development programmes at Sabah's tertiary institutions, Malaysia. This literature review is carried out through an analysis of secondary data in the form of related and appropriate previous studies conducted by researchers in the English as Second Language (ESL). The findings found that the ESL educators seem to move towards the 21st Century, yet additional training through professional development programs are needed to help them embrace the challenges of 21st Century education at tertiary institutions. This review may help to strengthen ESL educators' teaching skills which indirectly upgrade their quality level while at the same time help them to embrace the 21st Century during the Pandemic era.

Keywords: 21st Century Education, ESL, Pandemic Era, Professional Development, Tertiary Institutions

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has led most sectors including education to be put on hold. The pandemic has somehow coerced education organisations to impose a closure to face-to-face classes and meetings, but encourage virtual lectures, conferences and other online transactions to stop from Covid-19 keep spreading. The pandemic has induced a technological reformation in the education system thus asserting and necessitating the need for modern technologies incorporation in the learning system. In addition, a demand to meet 21st Century skills is still expected among learners, as they will be the future generation that embrace and incorporate technologies and 21st Century work environment. This idea is supported by Salma et al. (2020) in that online learning could provide actualisation in the

learning process at secondary to tertiary education level. They further add that the incorporation of online learning during the post pandemic era offers numerous functions in live or real time stream learning; for instance, rooms could be created directly for small group and individual discussions with the educators, when both educators and their students may need to find a physical room for discussion in traditional learning. Blended learning would become part and parcel of future educational society since the reopening of schools and tertiary institutions are unpredictable during post pandemic era. Salma et al. (2020) opine that the existence of technology in blended learning could persuade learners to be more active in the learning process, thus optimising learning outcomes. Eventually, it drives educators throughout the globe towards a more extensive utilisation of technology in order to impart knowledge and develop their students' 21st Century skills. Yet, in order for learners to be able to equip adequate 21st Century skills such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration and others, educators must first equip themselves with such skills before they are to nurture their students with such skills while at the same time able to incorporate technology in the classroom settings. As an institution that plays a pivotal role in the cognitive, social, and professional development of an individual, professional development is eventually needed to be conducted so that educators' IT knowledge and skills even at tertiary institution level would be updated to keep up with the development of current technological software and other upgraded tools suitable to be integrated in the classroom. Though it has been found that some educators within tertiary institution still implementing traditional methods of teaching during post-pandemic era as some educators think that traditional methods are still effective, most educational interactions are conducted partially online classroom. Inadequate ICT facilities at both homes and tertiary institutions as well as a lack of self-efficacy to fully employ technology are the challenges educators face when delivering teaching and learning during the post pandemic era. To succeed in their careers after graduating from graduate schools, professional development among educators is required so that they can be equipped with appropriate twenty-first-century skills and digital literacy. This paper illuminates the preparation experiences for teaching and learning in the 21st Century among ESL educators and at the same time enlightens benefits and challenges ESL educators face upon conducting professional development programmes in Sabah's tertiary institutions, Malaysia.

Preparation Experiences for Teaching and Learning in 21st Century

In today's world, new technology and environmental changes inevitably occur thereby disrupting and interfering with people's lives and welfare. This year, we are not spared from the effects of Covid – 19 Pandemic. The 21st Century has seen an increase in the learning of English as a second language as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Educational reform inevitably becomes necessary where both learners and teachers are equipped to cope with the demands of blended learning where they are expected to engage in more advanced critical thinking skills, communication, and collaboration along with the employment of technology. In this regard, educators are expected to acquire new theoretical and pedagogical knowledge in line with the advancements of the globalised world since the English language as a global language used not solely for academic purposes but also as a language of communication in international and online platforms (Yucedag and Sevik, 2021). The fact that each day students from different parts of the globe communicate through a variety of online platforms to learn, acquire knowledge and share their experiences with one another necessitates the need for students to learn and develop their English language, 21st Century skills as well as

digital literacy. To some extent, Covid-19 pandemic has given opportunities for educators to explore more about technology for educators as they may experience lack of support in terms of the provision mitigating ICT infrastructure and online teaching materials from education administrators to help improve their teaching quality.

2 English as Second Language

Language is the most common tool for communication (Buarqoub, 2019). Besides that, by knowing how to communicate in English, educators could share knowledge with their students, eventually expanding the latter's vocabulary and knowledge as well as driving them to enhance their experiences of digital literacy, communication, collaboration and creativity. Education in the 21st Century entails an era where technology plays a pivotal role in the process of learning and teaching including the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. Language educators do not have to teach using textbooks all the time as they could integrate technologies or media-based materials in their classrooms. With the help of these media, educators could attract students' interests and attention and expose them to ideas on particular topics during their learning processes, thus enhancing learning outcomes. In addition, the fact that some tertiary institutions within Sabah have adapted both online and blended learning there are now lesser physical interactions between students and educators. In some places where the areas categorized as green and yellow zones, blended learning could be applied with strict standard operating procedure such as the use of face masks and face shields along with maintaining physical distancing. In view of this, El-Rizag and Sarmini (2021) opine that blended learning could prepare the steps for a more advanced usage of digitalisation tools and this could become the preferred learning model to gain sustainability for future education. In the context of ESL education in tertiary institutions where English is not a first language, teaching and learning of may be difficult partly due to a lack of updated learning materials provided in teaching the subject. This may affect learners in adapting to learning the language in a more effective manner. Other than that, during online lectures, some students are not attentive resulting in them unable to catch up with and learn new knowledge about the language, nor develop aspects of 21st Century skills such as communication skills or critical thinking skills. If they are not keen on learning, it would be challenging for them to adapt to more advanced subjects and skills. The statement is supported by a study done by Simamora (2020) where it is found that online learning causes anxiety among students, as online lectures may contribute to boredom and frustration. Simamora (2020) further adds that online lectures that use video uploaded to YouTube is not preferable to students, because it is done early, and this may lead to misunderstanding of the entire topic due to the inability to obtain explanation from their lecturers. Additionally, without proper professional development, educators at tertiary educations in Sabah would not be updated with new teaching skills and materials and this could affect the teaching and learning of English in 21st Century. Therefore, there is a need for professional development for ESL educators in a bid to prepare their students to effectively function in a challenging 21st Century workplace in the near future.

3 Benefits of Conducting Professional Development Programmes at Sabah's Tertiary Institutions, Malaysia.

The Covid-19 pandemic has adversely affected Malaysian tertiary education system including at Sabah, Malaysia. According to Simamora (2020), Covid-19 Pandemic caused a sudden shift from face-to-face learning to online learning system, affecting not only learners but also educators in terms of their physical and psychological wellbeings. Keeping the aforementioned conditions in consideration, the post-pandemic era yields on opportune time to design and adopt effective learning strategies as well as professional development programmes for physical and virtual learning environments for university students. In the post-pandemic era, the adoption of advanced teaching methods and changing traditional classroom learning to modernized learning is inevitable.

4 Increase Capability in Teaching and Assessing

Prior to the pandemic era, educators in most fields across all education levels, including ESL educators at Sabah's tertiary institutions commonly integrate simple technology devices such as laptops and projectors in classroom settings. Furthermore, before the Covid-19 Pandemic, most ESL educators used textbooks, accepted submission of project papers and assignments through physical portfolios throughout the semester. However, during post pandemic era, all submissions needed to be conducted virtually. A sudden, unplanned and abrupt shift to full online learning with insufficient training and little preparation, would disorient many ESL educators which may result in poor experience which is uncondusive to sustain growth (Sreehari, 2020).

Hence, in order for educators to effectively implement the skills in the classroom, ESL educators in Sabah's tertiary institutions should be provided with opportunities to participate in professional development programmes. For example, providing a teaching module that helps the educators enrich and improve their knowledge related to technology, increase their capability in teaching and assessing. Harrell and Bynum (2018) maintain that a lack of sufficient, effective professional development and other related factors would influence technology incorporation and quality of teaching among educators to fulfil 21st century learning needs. Wilkerson et al. (2016) state that simply providing professional development programmes do not optimize educators' technology skills, but implementing such tools in the curriculum regardless of whether on site or virtual learning to elicit and build upon pre-existing knowledge, skills, resources and strengths is needed to maximize their teaching and learning quality effects.

Education scholars have become aware that in order to satisfy the needs of 21st Century learners, modification and reconstruction of education systems are needed to develop requisite necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions (Bedir, 2019). Professional development programmes would assist educators to keep themselves updated with new tools, resources, technology equipment and thus enhancing their knowledge with regards to technology while at the same time enliven their capabilities in teaching and assessing. When these educators' teaching and learning qualities improve, students' learning and achievement would tend to be positively affected too.

5 Challenges of Conducting Professional Development Programmes at Sabah's Tertiary Institutions, Malaysia.

The rapid growth in transformation of every human aspect including economy, social and technological during 21st Century has brought significant revolutions in society, thus

creating challenges among educators as there is a need to equip and empower students with skills that enable to cope with the current challenges (Jan, 2017). In addition, Covid-19 pandemic has also affected all walks of society, including education in that educational institutions have to quickly adapt to the so-called new norm (Teras et al., 2020). Due to the transformation needed in education, professional development and ongoing teacher's training programmes are considered as the cornerstones for quality education as they are thought to have positive direct impact on students' achievements (Madani, 2019). Inevitably, professional development programmes eventually are becoming a challenging task due to globalisation and continuous growing needs and greater expectations from society (Jamil et al., 2011). This is not helped by the fact that educators nowadays are not only seen as imparters of knowledge, but slowly they are required to shoulder the responsibility in shaping a better future citizenship (Jamil et al., 2011).

6 Inadequate ICT skills among educators

The Covid-19 pandemic has obliged all educational institutions to adhere to strict safety measures, including physical distancing while at the same time applying the implementation of online learning. Konig et al. (2020) argue that the concept of 21st Century education that focuses on digitalisation and 21st Century skills in classroom settings have been promoted among educators even before the pandemic occurred. However, tertiary institutions within Malaysia including Sabah are lagged behind with regards to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) transformation progress. Furthermore, in Konig et al. (2020) findings show that although most educators have maintained communications with their students and provided feedback to parents, the challenges that require ICT employment are mastered only to a lesser extent. In view of this, Konig et al. (2020) suggest that professional development that could foster the development of educators' ICT competence related teaching is needed so that teachers could embrace and integrate ICT skills effectively during the further partial school closure. Educators who received consistent and sufficient amount of ICT training programs may acquire high level of competency of ICT in teaching, improve their teaching and learning quality, indirectly reduce workload and make them more productive (Sahito and Vaisanen, 2017).

7 Self-Efficacy towards ICT integration among educators

The Covid-19 pandemic requires that all educational facilities to be temporarily suspended. The administration and management of matters related to education including teaching and learning need to be conducted online. This situation involves new knowledge and skills of ICT among educators, and indeed the lack of confidence or self-efficacy to integrate teaching and learning has exacerbated the professional growth among educators especially with regards to the implementation of online education. An individual's belief of self – efficacy may influence the decision and amount of effort geared towards accomplishing one task (Bandura (1986). In other words, if an individual believes that he is able to integrate technology or ICT skills in classroom setting be it face to face or virtual classroom, the individual may be aware that professional development programmes related to technology or ICT incorporation are needed to improve one's knowledge and skills. Aligned with Giles and Kent (2016), educators could utilize technology like smartphones for personal purposes such as using it to play games; but it would take another step for the incorporation of technology in instructional purposes. This is supported by Sahito and

Vaisanen (2017) who maintained that sustained ICT training increases self-efficacy, motivation and generates confidence among educators to use ICT more. In a nutshell, it shows that professional development related to the upgrading of skills in the incorporation of technology in virtual classroom setting is indeed needed during post pandemic era.

8 Conclusion

Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on education in English language field. To cope with the new norm, professional development programmes are needed for language educators to conduct effective online classes. Professional development programmes would expose educators to more updated knowledge and skills of ICT as well as teaching tools and materials. In addition, professional development could foster teaching strategies related to in 21st Century teaching and learning, and thus improving teaching quality in that learners are more active and engaged in of fulfilling their academic tasks. Professional development programmes have demonstrated that with acquired new and updated knowledge with regard to technology and 21st Century skills, classroom instruction, educators would improve their self-efficacy, and optimize their teaching quality which would directly improve student achievement too. In this way, professional development is an indispensable aspect in managing and coping with changes, especially so if it involves sudden and unforeseen circumstances like Covid-19 pandemic.

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