

## Using Reflective Practice to Play Effective Roles in Teaching English Language to Young Learners

Siti Noor Aneeis Hashim<sup>1</sup>, Nurahimah Mohd Yusoff<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universiti Utara Malaysia, Awang Had Saleh, School of Education,  
s\_noor\_aneeis@ahsgs.uum.edu.my,

<sup>2</sup>Universiti Utara Malaysia, Awang Had Saleh, School of Education, nura@uum.edu.my,

<sup>1</sup>. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9474-2122>

### Abstract

This study explored how English language teachers play their roles as reflective teachers in teaching English language to young learners at primary schools. In order to gather the information, this study employed qualitative case study approach. The main methodological methods were semi-structured interviews and document analysis. In total, 6 in-service English language teachers from primary schools involved in this study. This study were conducted in two phases to answer two research questions. The findings revealed two main themes known as; a) Language myths and b) The mechanisms of change. Results showed important frame of reference for teachers to implement reflective teaching to help them reflect on their teaching and to play their roles as language teachers in the classrooms effectively. Suggestions for future research are also included at the end of the study.

**Keywords:** Reflective teaching, English Language Teachers, Young Learners, Primary Schools

### Background

The English language is one of the most important languages to learn, and it is undoubtedly the most used language upon this universe. The Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 states that education will help Malaysians to have better lives in which it will lead to a brighter future. In conjunction to that, the blueprint stated that Malaysian young learners must study English as a second language (Farah Zulkefley & Abu Bakar Razali, 2019; Nur Syafiqah Yacob & Melor Md Yunus, 2019; Sarina Sani & Hanita Hanim Ismail, 2021) started from preschool at the age five to six years old to tertiary level (MoE, 2015). It would still be taught as a compulsory subject in the national curriculum at the primary level (ages 7 to 12), secondary school (ages 13 to 17), and post-secondary and tertiary levels of education (ages 18 and up). (MoE, 2015). A communicative language teaching approach is one that has been utilised in classrooms to engage students in interaction and meaningful conversation (Hassan & Gao, 2021; Mirbabayeva, 2021). Despite the broad applicability of English language to everyday life, it is often considered a difficult subject in schools (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020) and English language has undergone exceeding changes curriculum in terms of its lack of attractiveness to increase students' English learning potential in general (MoE, 2015,2017)

As regards, young learners must deal with issues in learning English at schools, and they must build their ability to acquire listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills to enable constructive learning to occur (Farah Zulkefly & Abu Bakar Razali, 2019; Cahyati, Parmawati & Atmawidjaja, 2019; Nurul Athirah Mohd Nasir & Azlina Abd. Aziz, 2020).

### **Literature review**

#### **English language teachers' reflective characteristics**

Reflective teachers are the most essential people in schools because they utilise reflective teaching to analyse their core ideas about teaching and learning (Roberts, Barblett, Boylan & Knaus, 2021) in order to ensure appropriate alignment with real classroom practise before, during, and after a lesson is presented (Colwell, Ince, Bradford, Edwards, Grenier, Kitto & Swindells, 2021). When teaching reflectively, reflective teachers think critically about their teaching and look for evidence of effective teaching (Alesech & Nayar, 2021) to make a difference in young learners' English language learning performance (Mantra, 2017; Awoniyi & Butakor, 2021). According to Borg (2003) "teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically oriented, personalized, and context sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (p. 81). In addition, Mendenhall, Cha, Falk, Bergin and Bowden (2021) agreed, reflective practice elements are needed in frolicking their roles as a teacher, varying their instructional practice, hovering their knowledge on making their teaching effective and attractive through the use of reflective teaching and reflective learning in the classrooms. These reflective characteristics are essential in teaching English language (Bryant, 2020; Faez & Karas, 2020) as it is a border-crossing profession (Selvi, 2012; Lee & Kim, 2021).

Similarly, Freeman (2016), Selvi and Yazan (2021) also refers teaching English as a borderless expertise which need them to reflect on their competency in English language knowledge as well as personal abilities that allow English teachers to plan, merge, act, reflect, and learn from their reflection (McLeod, Vaughan, Carey, Shannon & Winn, 2020). This cyclical reflective process build their confidence, have autonomous and able to function well in a variety of circumstances (Cirkovic-Miladinovic & Dimitrijevic, 2020; Ryan & Barton, 2020). Based on these reflective progressions, English language teachers become more capable to play their roles in the classroom as well as in making rational decisions and employing smart decisions in their teaching (Farrell, Baurain & Lewis, 2020; Yusmalinda, 2020 ; Siti Noor Aneis Hashim & Nurahimah Mohd Yusoff, 2021).

Besides that, the reflective English teachers will be able to reflect and put theory into practice by developing active teaching strategies for conveying information in the classroom and refining pedagogical approaches to enhance student learning (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017; Mulryan-Kyne, 2021). As a result of their reflectivity, reflexivity, competency, strong beliefs and capabilities to play their roles as English language teachers, they are able to effectively teach English to young learners in the classroom (Bremner, 2020; Zwozdiak-Myers, 2020).

### **The challenges faced by the young learners to learn English language.**

A number of studies have been undertaken to scrutinise the difficulties in learning English among young learners. A study conducted by Hazita (2016) states the young learners in Malaysian primary schools lacked competency in acquiring English language. There were less than 50% of the primary school students who were literate in the English language (EPU 2016, pp. 10-2 as cited in Hazita, 2016).

Similar to that, Ling and Yamat (2020) found the curriculum in Malaysia is more exam oriented, therefore young learners in Malaysia had little competency as they lacked of guidance and attention to acquire language as a social practice. As a result, Malaysian children exclusively utilize English only at school during English lessons (Ling & Yamat, 2020) because they quickly forget what they hear and may not distinguish phrases they know (Yılmaz & Yavuz, 2015).

In addition, Goh (2019) and Sibomana (2020) argued that, less competency among young learners is also caused by 'language switching' in the classroom as a result of confusions between the mother tongue and English norms. Therefore, a lack of exposure to use of English at home, as well as language anxiety syndromes, become impediments to hinder young learners in participating actively in the classroom, particularly reading and speaking in English (Sunyakul & Teo, 2020; Günes & Sarigöz, 2021).

### **The role of a reflective teacher.**

Teaching English as a second language in primary school requires teachers to establish a strong foundation for young learners, specifically in speaking abilities, as well as listening, reading and writing (MoE, 2015). Therefore, the English language teachers need to reflect on their classroom experiences (Siti Noor Aneis & Nurahimah, 2020) to identify hurdles and draw implications for future action.

Besides that, reflecting on their practices also enables the English language teachers to learn and put learning into action (Siti Noor Aneis & Nurahimah, 2021). As a result, the teachers are able to make modifications and perform their role as language teachers by planning the lesson, determining the appropriate tactics, and implementing the lesson in active and exciting ways to maximize the learning potential of young learners (Richards, 2013; Astuti, Wardana, Puspawati & Sukanadi, 2018; Zwozdiak-Myers, 2020).

Similarly, teachers could also use the proposed guidelines in 'SKPMg2' (Standard 4) to acquire ideas on how to play their part in planning and teaching English to young learners (MoE, 2017). In addition, English teachers could also improve their teaching quality by using reflective practise elements to reflect on and play their roles efficiently in the classrooms (Zwozdiak-Myers, 2020). Therefore, as part of the learning process, students will actively participate in class, engage with the content, and collaborate with one another in the classrooms (Alwayi, Embong & Hashim, 2021; Melor, Nur Ehsan, Kaur & Singh, 2021).

### **Problem statement**

Teaching English Language to young learners is a challenging task to be done in the language classroom at primary schools (Songbatumis, 2017; Bai & Wang, 2020; Low, 2020; Teng, 2020). This is due to the fact that the majority of the students in this learning environment have a multilingual background (Ramiza Darmi & Albion, 2013; Flognfeldt, Tsagari, Šurkalović & Tishakov, 2020). Some of them were bilingual, trilingual or even multilingual (Aronin & Yelenevskaya, 2021; Rajendram, 2021). They speak more than one language at home and employ dialects, making it difficult for them to understand English like native speakers (Luqmanul Hakim Zulkornain, Azman Che Mat, Nuruladilah Mohamed, Nur Syazwani Halim & Nurul Amilin Razawi, 2020).

They are lack of English proficiency, lack of opportunity and exposure to learn English at home (Zhang, 2020; Ticheloven, Blom, Leseman & McMonagle, 2021). Besides that, the young learners have inferiority complex to learn English (Kaipnazarova, 2020; Rajasekaran & Kumar, 2020) lack of self-confidence, felt anxious, insecure, confused about their language identity (Vaish, 2019; Esteron, 2020; Gorter & Arocena, 2020; Rajendram, 2021) and had less enthusiasm to learn English (Nilsson, 2019; Lixun & Kirkpatrick, 2020). Regarding to that, the English Language teachers need to reflect on these challenges and find out the relevant strategies on how they could play their role as language teachers to minimize the young learners difficulties in learning English language at primary schools. In doing so, the teachers were able to capture their interest and maximize their learning potential. Therefore, this study was done to get relevant insights on the subject matters as few researchers have focused on how the English teachers cope in teaching young learners in this regard.

### **Objective:**

The specific objective of this study is to explore how reflective practice empower English language teachers to play their roles in facing the challenges to teach English language to young learners at primary schools.

### **Methodology:**

This is a case study research which adopted from Yin (2002). The data were collected through semi-structured interview sessions and document analysis in two phases. A set of interview protocol comprised of two sections were used during the interviews. The interview questions were adapted from Copland, Garton and Burns (2014). The document from teachers' reflection logs, students' exercise books and checklist were gathered for document analysis. Hence, an exploratory case study approach (Yin, 2002) was employed as it enabled the researcher to have a close exploration of the lived experiences of the English language teachers.

Six English language teachers were purposively selected as the participants in this study (Patton, 2002). The data from the interviews, teachers' reflection logs and students' exercise books were triangulated to increase the validity and reliability of the data gathered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Based on Braun and Clark (2013), the six steps of thematic data analysis and Nvivo were used in this study to develop codes and themes. The trustworthiness of the study

was gained through triangulation, member checking and rigourousness in reporting the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The above methodology was used to answer two research questions:

1. What are the challenges the English teachers face in the classroom to teach English language to the young learners?
2. How do English language teachers use reflective practice to play their role in facing the challenges to teach English language to young learners?

### **Participants**

The participants in this case study were six in-service English language teachers who were from six rural primary schools in the northern state in Malaysia. These teachers had 22 to 32 years of service. They had taught the primary school students at both urban and rural schools. The teachers also held positions at school as English Language head panel and at state level as coordinating Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) and school based examinations, grading UPSR papers, becoming the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) master trainers, judging co-academic events, as well as handling English language competitions at the state level.

### **Findings**

The data in the first phase was collected and analyzed to answer research question one. There was one main theme and the five sub-themes emerged from the analysis. The main theme was Language myths and the five sub-themes were grammar, vocabulary, slang and accent, pronunciation and variations in English described the challenges the English teachers face in the classroom to teach the young learners with the difficulties.

Theme 1: Language myths

Sub-theme one: Grammar

The English language teachers told the students had difficulty to understand the English grammar and to apply it during speaking and writing activities in the classroom. The teachers told that:

I felt pity to them, they are struggling to understand English grammar. The students also face difficulty to remember it as it is too complex for them. They take a long time to master and use the grammar logically in speaking and writing. (Teacher Anuar, interview)

It's not an easy job. I can teach them all of the theory, rules and regulations, but it was less effective, unless the students practice it inside and outside the classroom. (Teacher Vina, reflection log)

The writing exercise on Wednesday need to be repeated. There were a lot of grammatical error in the students' writing. The incorrect use of grammar make me confuse in reading their compositions. The grammatical error

change the meaning of the story the students wrote. I need to correct them.  
(Teacher Zila, reflection log)

#### Sub-theme two: Vocabulary

The data from the interview and students' exercise book showed that the students faced challenges to use the verb and to understand the use of correct tense in various situations especially in the situation in the past.

My students have difficulty to use correct irregular past tense in writing. They tend to mixed up the tenses. (Teacher Nazmi, interview)

Last Sunday, Ali goed to the school. He goed with her fren, Karim.(Student 1, Excerpt taken from the exercise book)

They refused to talk in today's lesson, but some of them tried to say out their answers using a low voice tone and they spoke slowly. They had a pause during answering the question; which mean they were thinking which tense they should use in their speaking to answer the questions. (Teacher Ira, reflection log)

I and sister eat pizza yesterday. (Student 2, Excerpt taken from the exercise book)

#### Sub-theme three: Slang and accent

During listening lessons, the teachers found the students were unable to understand the dialogue played from the recorded audio. The teachers keep repeating the audio a few times to make sure the students could listen the words, phases, sentences in the audio. The teachers told;

Listening activities takes a long time if I'm using the story or dialogue. I need to replay the audio. I notice that my students rarely exposed to the slang words and accent used by the English speakers in the conversation. I have no choice. I have to use the provided CDs in the textbook which are from the education ministry. (Teacher Amri, interview)

I agree that the sentences used in the CDs provided in the textbook mainly filled with slang words. From my classrooms experiences, maintaining my students' focus to listen and to understand the conversation is very difficult for them as they don't understand what they mean. (Teacher Ira, interview)

#### Sub-theme four: Pronunciation

The Malaysian young learners are at the early stage to learn and acquire language in their mother tongue. Therefore, to learn and pronounce the words in English brings a hard time for the students as they are not using English at home. Therefore, the teachers told that;

I felt empathy to my last class students. It is hard for them to remember and to pronounce the words in English. It seems an alien to them. They are not familiar with it. It isn't always obvious to them as they only listen, speak, read and write English words at school with a little force. (Teacher Anuar, reflection log)

I need to give time and do other activities with them. It is unfair for them as they are non-native speakers who have not been taught these from their an early age, do not know how to pronounce the 'h' on 'hour', silent 'k' on 'know' and 'c' on 'carrot', The phonetic sound is difficult to enable them to merge. (Teacher Zila, interview)

#### Sub-theme five: Variations in English

Using the new Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) syllabus is a challenge to teach the students. There are variations used in the textbook especially in speaking and writing. The different forms of English make the students felt more difficult to understand the language and caused them to feel anxiety and less motivation to learn English. The teachers found that;

The students tend to write the words phonetically. The write it as same as the way how they would say it rather than how it's actually spelt. (Teacher Vina, reflection log)

As usual they felt confuse again! Especially between short form and full spelling; "we're" while speaking and "we are" in writing, they had viewed the slang that they have picked up from listening lesson adversely. (Teacher Amri, reflection log)

The too boy are kiking the ball. They'r in the field. (Student 3, Excerpt taken from the exercise book)

The data in the second phase was collected and analyzed to answer research question two. There was one main theme and three sub- themes emerged from the analysis. The main theme was the mechanics of change and the sub-themes were the impact on teachers' practices and the impact on students' learning in the classroom.

#### Theme 2: The mechanisms of change

##### Sub-theme one: The impact on own practices

Referring to the teachers' reflection logs and Standard Kualiti Pendidikan Malaysia Gelombang 2 (SKPMg2) document checklist, the data showed that the teachers applied reflective practice and have a good understanding on their role as the classroom planner, controller, guide, motivator and assessor as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Checklist on teachers' role.

No	Descriptions	Agree	Disagree
1	I know about the usage of 'SKPMg2' (Standard 4) form in the school.	6	
2	The teacher's role outlined in SKPMg2 (Standard 4) form helps me to reflect on my classroom teaching and to improve students' learning.	6	
3	The standard guidelines in SKPMg2 (Standard 4) could help me to reflect and develop my teaching competence.	6	
4	The teacher's role outlined in SKPMg2 (Standard 4) helps me to implement reflective teaching activities and 21 <sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning.	6	
5	I do understand the teacher's role as the classroom planner.	6	
6	I do understand the teacher's role as the classroom controller.	6	
7	I do understand the teacher's role as the classroom guide.	6	
8	I do understand the teacher's role as the classroom motivator.	6	
9	I do understand the teacher's role as the classroom assessor.	6	
10	Student as active learner reflect on my teaching and learning as good and effective.	4	2

The data in the second interview with the teachers described how the teachers learn and take advantages of their reflection to play their roles meritoriously in teaching. The findings showed most of the teachers were certainly aware of what they should do before, during, and after the teaching in order to plan and deliver their instructions based on the scheme of work, the previous lesson experiences, the current context issues and the students' experiences. The teachers also played their role actively in the classroom as they established classroom control rules and had a backup plan to deal with their students' behavior changes during the lesson. They also played their role to guide some of the students in small groups according to their abilities and needs.

The teachers also used reflective practice to assess their own practice. They believe as classroom assessors and evaluators; they managed to reflect and use the assessment for learning, assessment of learning, and assessment as learning to create particular ways to enhance the tasks given and provide functioning classroom discussions with the students. Knowing their role as classroom assessors and evaluators also help them to reflect on their classroom teaching especially on the best practices and the challenges in the classrooms. The experiences enable the teacher to reflect and plan their works better in improving the students' learning by providing flexible learning mode. The teachers told that;

My priority is to provide them suitable materials and adequate time to complete the activities and to finish the session on time. I also take some time to reflect in order to check and reframe my lesson. (Teacher Vina, interview)



Flipped classroom, hybrid learning, project-based learning home-based teaching and learning are the flexible learning modes I use to re-plan and empower my students to make use of their textbooks, internet sources and newspapers. (Teacher Nazmi, interview)

In addition, the teachers also mentioned about the advantages of reflection to play their role as classroom assessors and evaluators. They mentioned that;

I reflect and assess my teaching to create particular ways for using better assignments and conversations to determine what my students understand and do not understand. (Teacher Anuar, interview)

As an assessor need me to be justice and fair. I need to accept and I should focus on the area of competence rather than on the weaknesses and give supports to every student. (Teacher Zila, reflection log)

The guidelines is brief and there are lack of examples provided to suit my students' learning. I have to assess and evaluate the process we went through to understand them from the scratch and tailor my lessons accordingly. (Teacher Ira, interview)

The findings also showed the teachers considered the theories that underlying their teaching methods and their instructional goals. They also certainly concerned to assimilate the relationship between the theories and their practices. The teachers accustomed their roles and reframe their instructions to motivate the students and inspire themselves. They had discussions, investigations, observations, gather feedbacks from peers and students to get the ideas to do their teaching refurbishment. The teachers also had their own study to get the finest methods, to create flexible modules, materials and activities to be used in classrooms as well as developing innovative and effective classroom instructions. The teachers told that;

I like to have a discussion with other teachers to identify common factors and to get the recommendation on how I could relate between teaching and learning in helping me to motivate my students with language anxiety. (Teacher Amri, interview)

It is not enough to simply refer to the rubric as actual events necessitate me to evaluate and act progressively to deliver 21st century teaching and learning in my classroom. (Teacher Zila, interview)

The teachers also expressed their satisfaction and gratification on the role they played. The teachers told they attempted to develop connection between their espoused theories; what they believe they could do as a planner and their theory in use to reflect what they actually do to play their role as a controller, guide, motivator and assessor in the classroom. They reckoned reflection help them to rethink and being a good planner to develop best learning environment which reflects their students' abilities, needs, intellectual to increase their English competence from weak to better.

I reflect and think hard to plan and provide the best learning materials and environment which suit to my students' abilities, needs and knowledge. (Teacher Ira, interview)

I believe that, I mustn't set standards that are too high in my plan. It can sometimes be frustrating. (Teacher Nazmi, interview).

I learn from the things happened in the classroom and incorporate the elements of awareness to develop my teaching competence to help my students needs who are lack opportunity and the motivation to use English at home. (Teacher Amri, interview)

The findings also showed the teachers reflect and being more aware to manage their instructions by doing and connecting new knowledge to an existing schema. They also adding positive and negative reinforcement in the classroom to strengthen behavior and increase the likelihood to be repeated. Hence, the reinforcement also help the teachers to facilitate, motivate and manage the students to be away from a wicked behavior in the classroom. Therefore, they were able to handle the classes well, covering academics syllabus, use various teaching techniques could give meaning to the students to enjoy learning English in a harmless environment and play their role as a self-explorer to learn English.

I think playing my role as a manger is a very significant and imperative to manage the students and to capture their attention to get them to learn willingly. (Teacher Nazmi, interview).

I should become the best facilitator to the students in all the aspects to enable me to teach and support my students in learning for themselves and play their role as a self-explorer to learn English. (Teacher Anuar, interview)

Based on the previous experiences I guide and provide them with the recorded audio which used correct pronunciation by a native speaker and allowed them to surf the education websites during my English lessons. (Teacher Ira, interview).

Sub-theme two: The impact on students' learning.

The teachers in this study did their reflection in different time especially during planning and teaching a lesson, right after the lesson ended, while waiting to go to the next class and at the end of the day to look for overall performance. The findings showed there were positive and negative impact on students' active participation which affect their learning and their role as active leaners as learning English can be fun, hard and bored. The teachers learned from dealing with real, complex and difficult situation to afford a good and effective approach. They explored theories and applied them to their own experiences in a more structures ways. They reflected that;

I use music in the classroom rather than only textbook. I found my students are active and enjoy learning English using music and achieving the lesson objectives. (Except taken from Teacher Ira's, reflection log)

I need to change the classroom setting and provided rules to do a better station learning in future lesson to avoid a crowd in one station and to make sure every student gets the chance to participate actively in the activities. (Except taken from Teacher Nazmi's, reflection log)

They seem motivated and enjoyed playing the game although they could provide at least one correct information to fill in the table given. It is better than nothing. (Except taken from Teacher Zila's, reflection log)

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study suggest that English teachers need to use reflective practice to play their role as good English teachers, classroom planner, controller, guide, motivator and assessor. Playing their roles effectively offer a good impact on young learners learning English in primary schools as the teachers are always looking for ways to improve their methods to help the young learners thrive in their classroom. In addition, using different learning theories and techniques help teachers connect with different students based on their learning style and abilities. Therefore, reflective practice bridges the gap between the theories and practice. It helps the English teachers to explore and apply the theories and experiences in their classrooms in a more structure way. It also encourage the teachers to explore their own beliefs and assumptions as to find solutions to face their teaching challenges. Cirocki & Widodo (2019) also agreed to play their roles effectively, teachers need to study their own classrooms in order to better understand the students' needs and finding the ways to improve their instructions. Similarly, Yuan, Chen and Peng (2020) also highlighted, reflective practice enable the teachers to translate their beliefs into classroom teaching and understand what they need to pay attention to language teaching.

Along with it, the findings revealed the English teachers could provide the young learners with more conducive learning atmosphere at schools and relevant tools to use at school and at home. These actions will provide them with relatable English materials that they may utilise in their daily lives when connecting with communities outside of English lesson. Teaching strategies that are student-centered often have great success in helping students learn and grow better. Learner-centered approaches place the student as the authority in the educational setting, helping ensure that they are the focus of education and are in control of their learning to an extent.

The findings of this study may help English language teachers comprehend and recognise their role and beliefs, which constitute the basis of their reflective activity in order to provide better English lesson in the classroom based on their current context. Hence, the findings also revealed that teachers must apply reflective teaching and improve their own skills in order to conceive of each student as an individual learner with distinct requirements. As a result, developing reflective abilities allows them to think critically from the perspective of the

learners before teachers can prepare to teach the young children. These were related to Farrell and Yang (2019), as they also found when the teachers plan the lesson based on their students' perspective they could win the hearts and minds of the students to learn. Thus, the students can receive the information smoothly.

Having this real evidence can assist policymakers in improving earlier guidelines to enable reflective teachers to play their role in English classrooms effectively and fulfil the present curriculum demand as required. As mentioned by Pinter (2017) as well as Nafissi and Shafiee (2020) learning a new language is a hard endeavour that necessitates teachers playing an active part in using the target language in English classrooms.

### Conclusions

As a result, studies should be conducted in the future to explore the role of school leaders to help English language teachers in facilitating and supporting primary school kids to improve their English language ability in English classrooms. The findings of this study will enable English language teachers to improve their personality and professionalism in teaching English to adapt to the demands of learners in order to maximize their learning potential and comprehend English as a second language proficiently.

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