

EFL Teaching and Learning Practices in the Rohingya Classroom: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the teaching and learning of English in the Rohingya classroom, specifically from teachers' and students' perspectives. Originally from Myanmar, hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas were forced to flee the country from mass violence and persecution in search of a new life that would promise them safety, security and basic human rights – conditions that remain elusive to a vast majority of Rohingya refugees. Denied access to free healthcare and education, many Rohingya refugee children attend informal classes in community-run learning centres with the help of UNHCR and local NGOs or in *madrrasah* (the Arabic word for any educational institution), either secular or religious. For this study, a descriptive research design was used and data was collected through a combination of interviews, diary-writing, field notes, questionnaires and in-class observations. The findings revealed that conventional teaching and learning approaches were ineffective in the Rohingya classroom due to the unique composition of students of varying ages, learning abilities and knowledge levels all grouped in one class. It also found peer-learning to be an effective learning tool as the Rohingya children responded well to group activities, interacting actively with and learning from their peers. This study is significant in identifying a need for an English language curriculum incorporating approaches and techniques that teachers can use to create more meaningful teaching and learning activities that can accommodate the diversity and inclusiveness found in the Rohingya classroom.

Key words: EFL, Rohingya Children, Refugee Education, Teacher Perspectives, Student Perspectives, Case Study

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

To understand the Rohingya community, it is important to begin with their history. According to Szczepanski (2017), the Rohingyas are a Muslim minority mainly from the state of Rakhine (formerly known as 'Arakan') on the western border of Myanmar, near what is now Bangladesh. In 1785, the state of Rakhine was conquered by Buddhist Burmese from the south and as a result, a majority of Muslim Rohingya men were either executed or driven out. The survivors, ultimately numbering some 35,000, probably sought refuge in Bengal, then part of British India. In 1826, the British seized Rakhine after winning the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26). As a result of subsequent British policy, farmers from Bengal were allowed to settle in the depopulated area of Rakhine. These farmers included both the Rohingyas who were originally from the area as well as native Bengalis. The mainly Buddhist Rakhine people living in Arakan at the time reacted strongly to the sudden inflow of migrants from British India, thus planting the seeds of ethnic tension that continue to this present day. Although the Rohingyas' ancestral presence in Burma can be traced over centuries, the Burmese government does not recognise them as citizens. The process to deny citizenship rights to the Rohingyas started shortly

after the Burmese independence, with the enactment of the 1948 Citizenship Act. However, it was the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law that effectively stripped the Rohingyas of their citizenship and rendered them stateless in their own country. As a result, the Rohingyas lost their basic human rights of liberty and faced restrictions on movement as well as access to education and social services. In addition, they also faced arbitrary confiscation of property (Szczepanski, 2017).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), out of the estimated 54,856 Rohingyas in Malaysia, a majority of them came here with the fervent hope of being resettled through UNHCR programmes (Radu, 2016). In Malaysia, although the Rohingyas are conferred refugee status by the UNHCR, they are nevertheless denied access to free healthcare and education. In fact, many Rohingya children are born in Malaysia and remain stateless as a result of the undocumented status of their parents. According to Chia Wei, founder of The Berani Project, the status of these children results in them being denied access to basic rights such as education and healthcare (Radu, 2016). In recent times, the Malaysian government has embarked on a policy change that could uplift the welfare of the Rohingya community. However, for now, the status quo is maintained.

Rohingya children are denied access to mainstream schools; learning opportunities for them are limited and restricted to a vastly diverse and informal manner of learning in centres scattered around the country. These centres, called Alternative Learning Centres (ALCs) or Community Learning Centres (CLCs), are run by individuals, community foundations, NGOs and faith-based groups. In other words, these learning centres are frequently set up as a result of initiatives undertaken by the community for the community. Although the ALCs and CLCs are free to implement their own curriculum, they generally adopt the Malaysian national curriculum and for the most part emphasise on the teaching of three main subjects – Mathematics, Science and English with some time allocated for *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language, the national language of Malaysia).

For these children, learning English is a challenge. This is because the majority of them have limited or no exposure to the English language or even the Roman alphabet, and they also possess either limited or zero prior schooling. Under such circumstances, they need to be taught the very basics of the English language. This study explores the teaching and learning practices that occur in the Rohingya classroom and examines the effectiveness of the approaches used, from the teachers' perspective as well as the students'.

Objectives

The present study addresses the following objectives:

- RO1 To examine EFL teachers' perceptions regarding EFL teaching and learning practices in the Rohingya classroom.
- RO2 To examine EFL students' perceptions regarding EFL teaching and learning practices in the Rohingya classroom.

Significance

English is widely acknowledged as a lingua franca of international communication. Thus, it is important for Rohingya children to not only learn but practise using English as often as they can. This exploratory study is an attempt to not only examine and understand the current EFL teaching and learning practices in the Rohingya classroom, but also to engage the teachers and students in discussions to gather their perspectives on whether the current practices are adequate. It is also interesting that despite the relatively wide availability of research relating to refugee education, there is, to the researchers' knowledge, an unfortunate paucity with regards to available research on Rohingya children/students within the context of EFL teaching and learning in Malaysia.

It is hoped that this study and its findings will provide better direction for teachers to create more meaningful teaching and learning activities in the Rohingya classroom that can cater better to students of differing abilities, learning styles, knowledge levels and age groups in one classroom.

RELATED LITERATURE

Teacher Perspectives

According to Magno (2009), perspectives provide a good explanation of how EFL teachers carry out their teaching. These perspectives include:

1. An awareness of how language is acquired to enable the effective teaching of language;
2. An awareness of the differences that exist between learning in general and learning EFL;
3. The possession of individual beliefs on the subject of EFL learning can affect and impact EFL teaching; and
4. Assessment of teaching in EFL is conducted by observing teachers' attitudes in relation to teaching and learning.

A study by Sen (2009) on EFL teachers' perceptions found that teachers' individual belief systems play a significant role in influencing the approaches that they employ. Similarly, according to Richards (1996), teachers' beliefs and values form the basis of many of the decisions that they make in the classroom.

Student Perspectives

The findings in a study by Srijongjai (2011) on a group of students in an EFL writing class in Thailand found that social and aural learning were the most favoured primary and secondary learning styles of EFL students. It was also recommended that teachers should manage their classes in a manner that accommodates students with different learning styles. This can apparently be achieved by creating a social environment using group activities, teamwork projects and peer reviews. The study also found that a combination of audio-visual and multimedia teaching aids could help aural students improve their writing skills.

Classroom Applications

Apart from teachers, students with a lower level of English competence can also effectively scaffold their peers (Samana, 2013). It is not necessary that scaffolding should only be provided by an expert or a teacher. Novices or students who do not possess advanced English proficiency can also offer assistance to their peers. According to Ohta (2001), this is possible because each individual student possesses differing sets of strengths and weaknesses. In addition, students tend to take on different interactive roles during classroom interactions. For example, some students may be engaged in speaking while others are listening. Thus they can easily observe and be aware or conscious of the problems that their peers are facing or struggling with and in the process, offer assistance.

Samana (2013) also found that when the teacher provides scaffolding to the students, it is provided with the aim of encouraging learning. But, on the other hand, the aim of peer-to-peer scaffolding is solely to assist students in completing a task. Also, in the case of the teacher, he or she carefully and gradually provides scaffolding while students often provide immediate and direct solutions.

Social Learning

Fundamentally, sociocultural theories in educational practice originate mainly from the works of the Soviet era psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, who proposed that all learning occurs as a result of social interaction, thus giving birth to the theory of social constructivism (Apple, 2006). Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) describes the parameters of learning (i.e. the extent to which a person can learn new information with the help of another person); this could be anyone, ranging from an expert such as a teacher to a peer possessing the same competency or a level of competency that is more superior to the learner.

Meanwhile, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory posits that people learn from one another through observation, imitation and modelling. In other words, people learn by observing the behaviours of others as well as the outcomes of those behaviours. Hence, classroom activities that encourage teamwork (with close monitoring by the teacher) or mentoring, whereby a student of a higher competency level plays the role of mentor, can result in positive learning outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employed purposive sampling and involved 48 Rohingya students of both genders (male and female). The subjects were of varying ages, ranging from as young as five years old to the oldest who was 18 years old. The manager and teachers of the learning centre were all Malaysians.

Generally considered a technique likely to result in researchers obtaining findings that reflect the characteristics of their target population (Trochim, 2006), purposive sampling is also defined as a form of sampling in which particular settings, persons or events are selected for the information they can provide that cannot be obtained through other forms of selection (Maxwell, 1997). In addition, according to Babbie (1990), purposive sampling is the selection of samples based on the researcher's knowledge of the population and the nature of the study's objectives.

In-class observations were conducted over a period of eight weeks to observe the EFL teaching and learning practices that occurred in the Rohingya classroom. During observation, a running diary was kept and field notes were engaged to record the practices employed. An observation checklist was also utilised and the observational items covered two areas of interest:

General classroom environment

- a) Organisation of the Classroom
- b) Contents of the Classroom
- c) Classroom Management Strategies
- d) Classroom Climate

Language and literacy

- a) Oral Language Facilitation
- b) Presence and Usage of Textbooks and Workbooks

- c) Approaches, Strategies, Techniques and Methodologies (EFL Teaching and Learning)
- d) Approaches to Assessment

Interviews were also conducted with the teachers involved to gather their perspectives regarding the EFL teaching and learning practices in the Rohingya classroom. Meanwhile, questionnaires were administered to the students to gather their perspectives on the same parameters.

FINDINGS

EFL Teachers' Perspectives

It was found that the quality of English teaching in the centre was not consistent due to the absence of a comprehensive curriculum and the differing levels with regards to the teachers' qualifications, backgrounds and teaching experiences. In addition, the centre was faced with the problem of scarce resources, not only in terms of teaching staff but also in terms of teaching materials.

Although there was a diversity of teaching practices in the Rohingya classroom with each teacher adopting his or her own teaching approaches, there were some similarities as well. One of the common instructional practices was the emphasis on building vocabulary. A crucial finding emerging from the teachers' interviews is the significant role played by vocabulary learning in the students' overall English learning experiences. All the teachers interviewed unanimously felt that vocabulary learning was not only key to learning English, but more importantly it represents "*one of the most important skills necessary in teaching and learning English as a foreign language*". According to them, "*it is the basis for the development of all the other skills*" such as reading comprehension, listening comprehension, speaking, writing, spelling and pronunciation. However, they also acknowledged that in English language acquisition "*each area of English is equally important and the development of one area tends to accelerate learning in another*".

Another common strategy used by teachers is the adoption of multiple classroom activities in order to engage the students and to maintain the momentum of their focus and concentration. According to T1 (Teacher 1): "*A typical lesson may include spelling test, reading and comprehension activity, some pronunciation exercises and vocabulary building activities*".

Due to the diverse ages, learning abilities and knowledge levels in the Rohingya classroom, the teachers felt that scaffolding and prompts were also very effective to address the different learning gaps in order to provide temporary support that can help the students reach the comprehension and skill acquisition levels that they would not otherwise be able to achieve on their own. For example, one in-class observation note illustrated this instructional practice: "*Based on a picture in the workbook, the teacher read the first sentence to the opening of a story and then stops. The children have to complete the story using given words. The teacher answers questions and enquiries from the children and helps them to spell certain words and gives ideas by writing some helpful words and sentences on the whiteboard.*"

The study also found that there was a notable reliance of the students on *Bahasa Melayu*. To the Rohingya children, *Bahasa Melayu* is their second language while English is their third. As a result, the teachers took advantage of the students' fluency in *Bahasa Melayu* by adopting a dual-language teaching method during English lessons. In fact, for the better part of the class, the teachers engaged in *Bahasa Melayu* as the medium of communication. According to T2 (Teacher 2): "*Bahasa Melayu is used especially when explaining the meanings of words or when the teacher needs to instruct the students on what they are supposed to do*".

This study also found that teacher effectiveness was directly related to poor student attendance or absenteeism. According to T1 (Teacher 1): "*Sporadic student attendance definitely limits my effectiveness and slows down progress. A greater commitment to attending school regularly would be helpful*".

The teachers were of the opinion that the learning outcomes for the students were very low. These outcomes include language skills and literacy development. As a result, the students are likely to possess knowledge and skills far below the expected level for their age.

In the classroom, the Rohingya students displayed short concentration spans and were easily distracted. To address this, a common strategy used by the teachers was to conduct a number of different classroom activities in short succession with each activity taking approximately 20 to 25 minutes. This means that in a two-hour English class, the teacher organises between four to five different activities to build and maintain the momentum of the students' focus and interest.

To build vocabulary, the students were taught how to use dictionaries. For this purpose, the centre provides them with *Bahasa Melayu-English* dictionaries. During the in-class observations, it was noted that the use of dictionaries during lessons represented the core of the vocabulary teaching approach.

Interestingly, some of the teachers adopted a 'reverse approach'. Instead of giving the class 20 English words, the teachers gave 20 *Bahasa Melayu* words for the students to find the English meanings. This is not practised in mainstream schools where all activities in the English class are conducted solely in English. The teachers in the Rohingya classroom felt that this approach would enable the students to connect the language in which they were most comfortable with the new language being acquired. Once the students were finished with the task of finding word meanings, the teacher focused on pronunciation and further explained the meaning of each word in *Bahasa Melayu* to encourage retention. The students were then given 10 to 15 minutes to memorise up to 20 words (along with their accompanying meanings). Progress is often slow and it is up to the teacher to decide whether the students are ready to move on to the next level (i.e. sentence-formation, grammar). It is noteworthy that this approach is in direct contrast to the approach used in mainstream schools where teachers are more focused on examination preparation rather than comprehension.

Another strategy that the Rohingya students used was activating their background knowledge to make sense of what they read and hear. According to T4 (Teacher 4): "*The*

students try to guess the meaning of words by looking at the other words in the sentence. They use their prior knowledge to make sense of what they are reading by seeing how it fits with what they what they already know.".

EFL Students' Perspectives

A questionnaire was administered to gather the perspectives of the Rohingya students towards learning English. The questionnaire comprised 10 items and was designed to elicit the students' perceptions on various aspects of their English language learning experiences. It is to be noted, however, that only seven data sets were collected, taking into account the issue of absenteeism. Nevertheless, the data, although admittedly small, is acceptable in a case study of an exploratory nature and still provides us with some important insights.

Domains of English

All the respondents regarded the following skills to be important to them – reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and spelling. They recognised the significance of all these domains in attaining competency in English.

Favourite classroom activities

When asked about their favourite English language class activity, more than half of the respondents chose 'working in groups'. Two respondents chose 'reading' while another respondent chose 'quizzes'.

This corroborates with the data garnered from the in-class observations. During the in-class observations, it was observed that one of the primary ways the Rohingya students learnt was by helping each other and in the process, learning from each other. According to T4 (Teacher 4): "*The students learn from their friends using their home language.*".

This two-way reciprocal learning activity is called peer-learning and it appears to be one of the most preferred learning strategies in the Rohingya classroom. In fact, more learning appeared to take place when the students explained their ideas to each other and participated in activities in which they can potentially gain knowledge from their peers; it also helps that the Rohingya classroom was made up of older students as well as students with better abilities and higher knowledge levels. It was also observed that much of the peer-learning occurred informally and spontaneously without much teacher involvement.

Area of difficulty in learning English

All the respondents perceived speaking as the most difficult area in learning English. This might be attributed to the limited opportunities that they have in speaking English. It was found that the respondents lacked the opportunity to use newly taught words outside of the classroom as they continued to speak their mother tongue and *Bahasa Melayu* in their daily interactions.

Exposure to English

According to the findings, the average age at which each respondent first started learning English was eight years old. The average duration of English language learning was four years.

Importance of English

All the respondents did not only view English favourably but also deemed it as very important in their lives as they felt that they needed English as a means of communication in school and in the outside world. They also commonly responded as follows:

“English is important in my life because I can use the language to speak with everybody.”

“English is important in my life because I can use in my life.”

Classroom learning materials

All the respondents found the textbooks and workbooks used in class to be difficult and challenging. This could be a contributing factor in their level of understanding in class. This could also explain their common response: *“Sometimes I can understand, sometimes I cannot understand.”* It was observed that some of the books used in the Rohingya classroom reflected the standards and level found in mainstream schools.

Learning style

When the respondents were asked about the best way for them to learn English, five of the seven respondents indicated that they learnt best by ‘asking questions to the teacher to help me understand more’. Two other respondents had different preferences and indicated that ‘pictures in the books and workbooks helped me a lot’. One other respondent indicated ‘listening to the teacher while she or he is teaching in the class’.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Despite attempts to address the educational and language needs of Rohingya children/students, there is still the absence of a coordinated policy consolidating the various aspects of alternative education which includes English language learning to not only the Rohingyas but to other refugee children/students as well (UNICEF, 2015). The ‘curriculum’ falls short of providing a path to an adequate high school certificate, much less a path to university. T1 (Teacher 1) reinforced this point: *“At the moment there is no pathway for students, hence why there are some students that have been in the same class for several years and after a while it is difficult to retain them.”* In the absence of a structured English language curriculum, each teacher is principally responsible in setting standards, creating strategies and implementing methodologies as he or she sees fit.

The Rohingyas’ inability to sit for the UPSR and PT3 public examinations ultimately denies them a formal,

nationally-recognised record of academic achievement and thus, they face a bleak future not only in Malaysia but also when they are resettled in other developing or developed countries.

The findings from this study demonstrate that overall, teachers are open to implementing instructional practices that do not only increase flexibility and adaptability in teaching but in the learning process as well. They appear to be willing to implement new and effective practices. However, it should be noted that this study was limited to an eight-week period and addressed beliefs and perceptions, and did not assess any EFL teaching-learning intervention experimentally.

This study also found that the students’ overall EFL learning progress was related to the following aspects of vocabulary learning: (a) skilful use of the dictionary, (b) self-initiation in learning, (c) willingness to spend time on vocabulary learning, and (d) active practice of newly learnt words outside of the classroom.

The in-class observations indicated that learning English was more fun to the Rohingya students if they could play language games in the classroom. In other words, if English was made easy and fun, they would find the learning process more pleasurable and this could subsequently lead to better learning. This was challenging for the teachers to deliver, as such approaches require resources – of which the centre lacked.

The findings also indicated that the majority of the students perceived their classroom positively and were extrinsically motivated, in tandem with Wei and Elias’s (2011) notion of the reciprocal relationship between students’ perceptions of their classroom environment and their motivation to learn a language.

It is universally accepted that not all students are alike. This is especially true in the Rohingya classroom where a typical class consists of students with a diverse range of ages, knowledge levels and learning abilities. Based on the findings of this study, adopting a conventional and linear approach to teaching in the Rohingya classroom will likely have a significantly less positive impact.

Based on the data gathered and analysed, the researchers recommend a differentiated approach, one that will allow students multiple options for both teacher- and student-centred learning as well as for peer-learning in order to cater for different needs and preferences in the process of learning, developing and making sense of information and ideas.

Differentiated instruction is defined as a teaching concept based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse students in classrooms (Tomlinson, 2001). The concept of differentiated instruction requires teachers to be flexible in their approach to teaching and to be able to adjust the curriculum, and their presentation of information to learners, rather than expecting students to adapt themselves to the curriculum.

The results of the questionnaire revealed that the Rohingya students responded well to group activities. In addition, during the in-class observations, it was further found that there was a natural tendency for the students to tap on their peers’ skills and knowledge. So, rather than having students work in isolation, this study recommends cooperative

learning as an effective teaching and learning strategy where small groups, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of activities to improve their understanding of a topic (e.g. greetings). Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of belonging and shared achievement.

The questionnaire data also highlighted the students' perceived area of difficulty which was speaking English. It was observed that the students lacked confidence in communicating in English and often resorted to speaking in their own Rohingya language or *Bahasa Melayu* to express themselves. In order to address this, the study recommends Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). The idea behind this approach is to help learners communicate more effectively and appropriately in the realistic situations that they may find themselves in. Also, a common aim of CLT is the promotion of fluency over accuracy (Tan, 2016).

On the whole, the findings reveal conventional and linear approaches to be less suitable in the Rohingya EFL classroom due to the unique composition of students grouped in one class. It is necessary, however, to conduct further research for us to reach a more solid conclusion, and for us to understand to what extent stakeholders are able to provide quality education. 'Quality education' is defined as education that is available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable (INEE, 2010). This definition of what a quality education should be is indeed apt for the refugee children living in Malaysia. There are many questions left to be answered – how are teachers trained; how are the learning centres financed; how do we provide accreditation and certification; student enrolment. Knowing more about teachers' and students' beliefs and perceptions helps researchers answer these questions and identify the gaps related to curriculum, policy, and professional development.

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