

Professional Up-skilling of English Language Lecturers (Pro-ELL) Programme: The Programme Impact on Malaysian Polytechnics and Community College Educators English Proficiency

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Abstract: Poor English proficiency among students in Malaysia has been reported regardless of their education level. Often, students with low English language proficiency is associated with educators' ability and competency to teach the subject. Efforts have been made particularly by the Malaysia Ministry of Education (MoE) to improve the educator's English proficiency level. One of the strategies aimed at improving English educators' ability is by introducing the Professional Up-skilling of English Language Lectures (Pro-ELL) Programme. This programme which is one of the initiative by British Council joint venturing with Malaysia Ministry of Education (MoE) has been conducted among polytechnic and community college English language educators. Prior to the programme, an online Versant test was conducted to measure their initial proficiency according to CEFR, followed by Aptis test after the programme. Findings revealed that majority of the participants showed improvement in their band score to Band B2 and C1 after completing the programme. Furthermore, participants were satisfied with the knowledge gained from the programme and agreed with its effectiveness in improving their English proficiency. Overall, this study has shown that the Pro-ELL programme has been successful in assisting the English educators to improve their English skills not only for teaching but also self-learning purposes.

Keywords: English language teachers, teacher proficiency, English programme, Professional Up-skilling of English Language Lecturers (Pro-ELL)

1.0 Introduction

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 highlights the need for proficiency in both Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, and English as the second language. A good command in English is necessary as it is the de facto language of international communication. Besides, having good command of English helps individual to gain more opportunities in many facets of life particularly one's career. As such, the policy of *Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu, Memperkukuh Bahasa Inggeris* (MBMMBI) at primary and secondary school levels includes a set of initiatives to support the development of proficiency in both languages. Meanwhile, Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015–2025 (Higher Education) was also designed to transform Malaysia's higher education system to be more adaptive to competitive global economic environment that require future workforce to master STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) as well as English. In short, both MEB and MEB(HE) rank language proficiency as one of the desirable attributes in student aspirations.

Regrettably, according to English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC, 2019), the English language proficiency and mastery among Malaysian students are declining from time to time and is at its chronic state. This indirectly contributes to the increasing rate of unemployment among local university graduates (Shanmugam, 2017). Regardless of their good academic scores, graduates who lack of acceptable level of English proficiency will struggle to compete especially at international level. However, it is also undeniable that students' English command are affected by

English educators' own proficiency and this includes the educators' teaching ability and quality. With this said, there is a mutual dependence and correlations between English educators' proficiency on its impact towards student's English proficiency.

In order to empower and develop a good command of English proficiency among educators, it is crucial to identify English programmes that tackle the needs in improving English skills and teaching among the educators. Particularly among inexperienced educators, it is important to point out the essential methodology of English language training that highlight the essence of teaching. A substantial English programme not just covers a broad span of teaching ideas and activities to enliven lessons, but also make it more motivating and interesting. It is of great significant for a programme that expose trainers to numerous activities and tools to enrich educator's language teaching and transform classroom into fun learning environment for young learners. Not just an efficient language programme may increase educator's confidence, but also for their self-improvement. Thus, this study is aiming at examining the effectiveness of one of the English programme developed by British Council in joint venturing with MoE; Professional Up-skilling of English Language Lecturers (Pro-ELL) Programme.

2.0 Literature Review

English language proficiency among in-service English educators in Malaysia is currently declining. A report shows that two-thirds of 70,000 English educators in primary and secondary schools that sat for the Cambridge Placement Test show less proficient in English command (Jalleh, 2012). This astonishing finding shows that an urgent effort is required as this indirectly reflected the severity of the aforementioned issue. According to Shishahavan and Sadegi (2009), it is important for English educators having good English proficiency as this will be reflected in the quality of the students that they produce as well as the fact that these educators are the language model accessible to the students. This is to say that it is of vital importance for English educators to be highly proficient to produce students that are competent in English.

The national teachers' union was urged to acknowledge that substandard level of teaching is one of the primary reasons for poor English proficiency among students. This issue has also been highlighted in the MEB. Exacerbate the problem, there is often a mismatch between subjects in which educators are trained and the subjects that they are assigned to teach. Supporting to this, the MEB revealed that 30% of English school educators were not trained to teach English. Additionally, MEB also reported that a significant number of English educators (n=7500) who took the Cambridge Placement Test (CPT) did not reach the minimum standard required to teach English. This has put English quality in an alarming situation.

As a response, the MoE has announced an initiative in 2015 in the form of a Roadmap for English language education covering pre-school all the way up to tertiary education. The main intention of this Roadmap is to lay out a way forward for improving the standards of teaching and learning of English within Malaysian education system. This Roadmap also provides a comprehensive plan to drive English Language Teaching (ELL) development in the country. The main purpose of this Roadmap is to formalize MoE's on-going efforts to strengthen ELL as encapsulated in the MBMMBI policy that presents a clearly focused plan for aligning English language teaching with the Ministry's own language teaching policy.

The Roadmap: English Language Education Reform in Malaysia (2015-2025)

The Roadmap for post-secondary English education is organized in accordance with the three MEB Waves from 2013-2025. Plans are presented in detail for planning phases of curriculum, teaching and learning, and assessment. The following are the 3 phases:

Table 1 The Roadmap for post-secondary English education

Phase	Goals
Phase 1	Preparing for structural change – 2015 to 2016
Phase 2	Implementing and Monitoring Structural Change – 2017 to 2020
Phase 3	Scaling Up Structural Change – 2021 to 2025

Phase 1 focuses on the expansion of Malaysian education system to ensure equal access to education for all children from preschool to post-secondary as well as tertiary level. Moving to Phase 2, the main concern is now on establishing and sustaining a system of high quality education. A key factor to attaining quality education and ensuring its sustainability is to focus on educators' capacity building. Investment in educators is crucial as they are the main language model in classroom as well as transforming them into providers of high quality English language education.

As most studies and policy implementation are mainly focused within preschool to secondary contexts, there is a limited focus placed at post-secondary level. This highlights the need to raise standards for teaching and learning English at post-secondary level. To make every post-secondary student proficient in English at Band B2 according to CEFR level by 2025, any English course in the nation must develop students' capacity in the language to equip them to work in the globalized economy (MEB, p. 108). Therefore, a course of action is needed to develop a core, CEFR-informed curriculum to meet the demands of post-secondary education. This requires a change of policy from being a 'test curriculum' to be a 'teaching curriculum'.

Teaching and learning issues warrant immediate attention, particularly because the quality of English educators influences the quality of the language used in English lessons and has a direct impact on learning effectiveness. Despite several decades of instructional problems at post-secondary level, the needs to enable educators to meet the demands of post-secondary English education has been ignored. It should also have pointed out that current educator education programmes in teaching institutes and universities are less focused on post-secondary teaching than for pre-school, primary and secondary teaching. Thus, high impact programmes for post-secondary English language education that provide direct support to educators and students are vital. Concerned about this issue, the ministry and its stakeholders have placed substantial efforts in providing English language programmes to deal with English proficiency issues.

According to Altmisdort (2016), professional development of language educators requires them to equip themselves with the necessary proficiency and knowledge in reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. The aforementioned skills are crucial for any language educator as this reflects one's competencies and serves as the basic foundation of being an effective language educator (Alhabahba, Pandian, & Mahfoodh, 2016). These are also macro language skills (Burns & Siegel, 2018) that need to be placed in any language programme to build up a comprehensive set of language modules (Richards, Conway, Roskvist, & Harvey, 2013). It is therefore vital for English language educators to have an advanced level of English proficiency which would later help advance their students' English proficiency and become autonomous English language learners in the future (Chambless, 2012).

Nevertheless, there is a limited English programmes that have managed to improve educators' English competence that serves the main purpose of learning a language (Cabigon, 2015). More attention has been given to mastering linguistic knowledge of the target language (Igawa, 2013). As educators are often regarded as target language model, it is thus crucial to mount language programmes and training that suit to local context. For example, MoE in its collaboration with the British Council have introduced several English language programmes namely: (i) Professional Up-skilling of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT) Programme to enhance English language competence among school educators, and (ii) Professional Up-skilling of English Language

Lecturers (Pro-ELL) Programme for post-secondary English language educators. In this study context, the Pro-ELL program has been adopted by polytechnics and community colleges in Malaysia to train their English educators. Meanwhile, higher learning institutions or universities (as statutory bodies) are free to determine their own initiatives in empowering the competencies of their English language teaching staff.

Professional Up-skilling of English Language Lecturers (Pro-ELL) Programme

The MoE has prioritized the implementation of initiatives to develop language and teaching skills of English language educators across Malaysia. To fulfill this purpose, the MoE collaborated with the British Council to develop and deliver the Professional Up-skilling of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT) and Professional Up-skilling of English Language Lecturers (Pro-ELL). Introduced in 2012, the project aims to improve and strengthen the level of English language proficiency and teaching skills of the local school educators. To date, the Pro-ELT and Pro-ELL project was targeted at 14,000 school educators across all 13 states and 3 federal territories of Malaysia. The main focus of the project is to raise these educators’ English proficiency level either from Band B1 to B2 or B2 to C1 on the CEFR scale. 76% from the first cohort of 5,000 teachers have successfully improved their English language proficiency through the Pro-ELT programme.

Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)	Proficient user	C2	9
		C1	8 7.5 7 6.5
	Independent user	B2	IELTS 6 5.5
		B1	5 4.5 4
		A2	
	Basic user	A1	

Figure 1 CEFR Band Score
 (Source: <https://www.ielts.org/ielts-for-organisations/common-european-framework>)

The Pro-ELT and Pro-ELL projects are a part of the many programmes and training conducted by the Government to enhance English proficiency among its citizens. It is important to note that the philosophy of the implementation of the Pro-ELL project is the belief that high quality educators are the most important factor of student outcomes. In addition, high English proficiency is a prerequisite to teach the language well. Acknowledging that the English language proficiency issue also affects the English language educators in polytechnics and community colleges, the Pro-ELL programme was adapted by Department of Polytechnic and Community College Education (DPCCE) into Pro-ELL programme to help raise their proficiency.

The objectives of this Pro-ELL programme are:

1. To improve listening, speaking, reading and writing skills among English language educators in polytechnics and community colleges; and
2. To improve participant' English language proficiency.

The Implementation of Professional Up-skilling of English Language Lecturers (Pro-ELL) Programme among Polytechnic and College Community English Educators

In 2018, the Curriculum Division of the Department of Polytechnic and Community College Education (DPCCE) conducted an online Versant test for 496 English language educators in polytechnics and community colleges. From the online test, 146 English educators scored Band B1 and below. As the English Language Education Roadmap 2015-2025 document stipulated that an English language educator teaching at post-secondary level must be certified at minimum Band C1, the Competency and Career Enhancement Division (BKPK), DPCCE was tasked with running a programme to raise English language proficiency among selected teaching staff.

Following the online Versant test, the Professional Up-skilling of English Language Lecturers (Pro-ELL) Programme was implemented in 2019. For a start, the programme was targeted at educators who scored Band B1 and below at polytechnics and community colleges in Northern and East zones. The training sessions were delivered by instructors from MoE's English Language Teaching Center (ELTC). A selected number of English educators who were certified at Band C1 in the Versant test were recruited to serve as facilitators and moderators for the face-to-face and online portions of the programme. The programme consists of three (3) phases that will last for at least six (6) weeks. The three phases are as follow:

Table 3 Pro-ELL training phases

Phase	Session	Time period
1	Face-to-face interaction	1 week
2	Online tasks - Independent learning at own institution	Minimum 4 weeks
3	Face-to-face interaction and Aptis test	1 week

During the face-to-face sessions in Phases 1 and 3, participants were informed of government's initiatives to enhance English proficiency among educators, Aptis test format, strategies to enhance English competency and language forms for all skills- reading, writing, listening, and speaking. During Phase 2, participants were given assignments for all four (4) skills. Schoology was used as the online learning platform. For writing skills, participants were required to prepare short and long essays based on the situations given. For speaking skills, participants were required to upload recordings of their prepared speech and response to prompts. For reading and listening skills, participants had to read texts, listen to recordings, and answer questions based on the texts or recordings given. During this phase, peer to peer feedback and comments from facilitators were used to track and bolster participants' progress.

On the last day of Phase 3, participants are required to sit for the Aptis test- Aptis test is an English proficiency test developed and conducted by British Council that is designed to identify test-takers' proficiency on the scale of A1 to C2. This test was used to measure participants' English language proficiency after undergoing the Pro-ELL training. The test assesses reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills as well as vocabulary and grammar. The minimum score required for the consolidation level is at Band B2 or above. Even though the Roadmap requires English educators teaching at post-secondary level to achieve Band C1, however the main aim of this programme at

this point is to improve English language proficiency among English language educators in polytechnics and community colleges.

After the programme, a survey was conducted among the participants to determine the efficacy of the programme by examining the effectiveness of the course and to what extent the Pro-ELL programme has increased their knowledge. The survey employs a 5 likert score to determine participants' agreement with the statement on the course.

3.0 Methodology

The initial implementation of Pro-ELL was conducted in Northern and East zones of Peninsular Malaysia and among polytechnic and community college educators. Data was collected through non-participative observation and from Versant English test, Aptis English test, and a survey at the end of training to measure participants' perceived level of knowledge and course effectiveness.

Educators (n=146) shown in Table 2 who scored Band B1 and below in Versant test were chosen as participants. The course was first delivered at Seberang Perai Polytechnic (PSP), Penang from 22nd April to 14th June 2019 and 24 participants were involved in the course. A same training was then conducted in the East Coast at Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin Polytechnic (PSMZA), Terengganu from 25th August 2019 to 3rd October 2019. 22 participants were involved in the training.

Table 2 Distribution of Versant test score

Band	Number of Scorers
C2	Irrelevant
C1	42
B2	308
B1	114
A2	16
A1	2
No score	14
Total	496*

*This includes non-English language option educators.

*The number of English language option educators in polytechnics and community colleges in the eSiS system (until 15 January 2020) is 281.

4.0 Result

Table 4 shows the difference between Versant score prior to Pro-ELL programme and Aptis score following the Pro-ELL programme. The results show that majority of the participants were certified at Band B1 (n=56) and Band A2 (n=11) in the Versant test. Meanwhile, results from the Aptis score show that there is an improvement in participants' English language proficiency following the Pro-ELL programme. Specifically, in the Northern zone, 11 participants have scored Band B2 and 13 participants have scored Band C1. Adding to this, in the East zone, 19 participants have scored Band B2 and 3 participants have scored Band C1. This clearly shows that the Pro-ELL programme has successfully improved participants' English proficiency.

Table 4 The difference between Versant score (before Pro-ELL) and Aptis score (after Pro-ELL)

Year	Zone / Training location	Date	Number of participants eligible for the course	Number of participants who attended	Versant Test Score (Before course)	Aptis Test Score (After course)
2019	Northern (PSP)	22 April 2019 - 14 June 2019	41	24	B1 : 28 A2 : 6 A1 : 1 No score : 6	C1 : 13 B2 : 11
	East (PSMZA)	25 August 2019 - 3 October 2019	33	22	B1 : 28 A2 : 5 A1 : 1 No score : 0	C1 : 3 B2 : 19

Table 5 shows the mean score of participant's knowledge after attending the Pro-ELL programme. The scores show an increase of participants' knowledge in terms of their understanding of the content ($M=4.6$), knowledge gained ($M=4.8$), ability to practice the acquired skills ($M=4.6$), and improving problem solving skills ($M=4.4$). Majority of the participants also agreed that the course has improved their English skills effectively. Moreover, in terms of the effectiveness of the programme, it is found to be effective ($M=4.7$), has increased participants' level of understanding on the programme content ($M=4.6$), achieved its initial objectives ($M=4.6$), the content is representable and easy transferred ($M=4.7$), and the delivery method was appropriate ($M=4.6$). Overall, the Pro-ELL programme has successfully increased participant's knowledge and skills as well as improving their English proficiency in general. Meanwhile through observation, participants have engaged with all the activities actively and this has directly helped them to enhance their English language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking).

Table 5 Participants' knowledge score (post Pro-ELL programme)

Knowledge level	Average score
Level of understanding.	4.6
Knowledge gained after attending the course.	4.8
Practice the acquired skills.	4.6
Problem solving skills.	4.4
Course effectiveness	Average score
The effectiveness of the course in general.	4.7
Level of understanding after taking the course.	4.6
Objectives achieved.	4.6
The suitability to transfer knowledge to students.	4.7
The appropriateness of training delivery and method.	4.6

5.0 Discussion

According to Harwell (2003), a professional development programme can only succeed if it has a strong content based on a well-planned and long-term strategy. It is important to highlight that the key to delivering a successful programme is to treat it as a process rather than an event given the fact that changes take time. In addition to that, effective in-service educators programme emphasizes on curricular and instructional strategies, thus significantly affecting their own teaching and students' learning (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010). Therefore, the process of developing and constructing an English programme is crucial in order for it to supply the right content based on the targeted context.

In this study, the Pro-ELL programme has benefited the participants in their English language proficiency through an empirical evidence provided. The Pro-ELL programme has helped the participants to improve their English language competency and obtain better scores in CEFR-aligned tests. As a result from this programme, the competence of English educators can be enhanced and illustrated through Aptis assessment. The increase in participants' English language proficiency also reflected through their credibility in delivering effective teaching and learning sessions. However, this study only examined the participants' perception on the effectiveness of Pro-ELL programme in empowering their teaching and learning as well as improving their language competence. This study somehow does not look into the gap between training content and syllabus expectation to examine if participants' own teaching and learning for specific purposes is directly affected by this course. Thus, the direct impact of this training programme onto participants' own students are not measured in this study and further research is needed.

This study may be significant and beneficial to policy makers and programme managers in formulating interventions through in-service training to enhance staff competency. Positive findings from this study can help DPCCE to plan for expansion of this programme to involve those of B1 and below in other zones (Sabah, Sarawak, Central & Southern) in 2020 and to educators who scored Band B2 in various zones in 2021 and beyond. Findings from this study also helps to prove the improvement in English language educators' own proficiency. Through this programme, participants are able to reflect on their professional growth in teaching of English language as outlined by the government and as desired by stakeholders. To further assure the impact of the Pro-ELL Programme, the MoE could consider recertifying the English language educators' English proficiency as a viable mean of maintaining the quality of English educators in the country. This will ensure that educators will constantly be at their best besides cultivating a sense of commitment, dedication, and responsibility in teaching others.

6.0 Conclusion

This study has shown that the Pro-ELL programme has been effective among English language educators in polytechnics and community college educators. This programme has helped them to improve their English language proficiency through better scores in CEFR-aligned test. This study also shows that a well-thought-out training programme may help to upgrade and strengthen target participants' learning and teaching abilities. To maximize the impact of any programme targeted upon them, it is vital to acknowledge participants' roles and concerns when designing educational reform to bridge the gap between what the policy makers or top management levels aspire for and what the grassroots really yearns for. This is important prior to developing programmes that best suits their needs.

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