
Title	Teachers' views of English language teaching: Formative influences and changing approaches
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Teachers' Views of English Language Teaching: Formative Influences and Changing Approaches

by
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"It is true that part of the time each of us teaches English in the narrower sense of teaching the elements of one particular language: we correct spelling errors, we object to unidiomatic expressions, we write 'gr' for 'grammatical error' in the margins of papers. But we soon reach the borderline between teaching the English language and teaching something else."

"...is it an exaggeration to say that the future of our reading/writing/thinking/speaking culture is mainly in the hands of 'English teachers'? That only if we serve and practice (sic) the arts that used to be called 'liberal' - grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, logic - will they live? That if we abandon them, they will probably die?" [Wayne Booth, 1988]

INTRODUCTION

This is a time of change in English teaching. In the UK, for example, English teaching is going through a critical phase with the adoption of the National Curriculum. Until the introduction of the National Curriculum, teachers of English enjoyed professional autonomy in terms of what to teach. While we have had a national curriculum for a long time in Singapore, there are major changes, too, with the introduction in 1992 of the new English Language Syllabus (Primary & Secondary). For example, the new syllabus to be used in Singapore schools identifies a number of emphases that make it different from the traditional, grammar-based syllabus of the past 35 years. The new syllabus takes into account recent developments in language teaching in the mainstream and also local conditions for the learning of English. It stresses the intrinsic relationship of the four skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing. This seems to be an appropriate time to take stock of the situation pertaining to English Language (EL) teaching in Singapore.

At a time of curricular change, it is always useful to survey the views of teachers. In the UK, Protherough and Atkinson (1992) and Davies (1992) independently carried out

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studies assessing the attitudes of teachers to the subject of English and to their work. Protherough and Atkinson's was a much more general study, designed to survey the opinions of English teachers about their training, their profession and themselves. Davies (1992) studied teachers' attitudes to a variety of issues related to their specialisation.

There has been some research in Singapore on teachers' views on their role and work, but there has been, as far as we know, only one pilot study to gather English teachers' views on their work. This particular study was by Wong (1977) who sought the views of 99 English-medium secondary school English teachers in 27 schools in a questionnaire survey on the strategies they employed in their teaching and the extent of the influence of such factors as students' motivation and the environment on language learning. According to Wong, although most of the sample (some 44%) were non-graduates and, by definition, non-specialists, they were teaching EL as their major subject. The effect of an instrumental motivation on students' language learning was obviously strong, and the English results showed that students worked hard to do well in the examinations. The teachers had to work against a tendency among students to switch to dialects when speaking among themselves although the teachers' presence acted as one 'interlocutory constraint' (quoting Houston, 1972:214). The heterogeneity of linguistic environments the students came from was often seen as a problem in the learning of English as they provided different degrees of exposure to the language (Lee, 1974:219-221).

For reasons of general deployment, all teachers are teachers of English (largely as non-specialists). Those with a first degree in English Language or English Literature specialise in the teaching of English. This study is confined to those who specialise in the teaching of English. The purpose of this study is to find out the views of English (specialist) teachers on the nature of EL teaching and their perceptions of the professional issues in their subject of specialisation and also whether these views interrelate in such a way as to suggest certain coherent attitudes to the subject of English. Or, as in the case of Davies' study (1992), there may be a high degree of idiosyncrasy in the teachers' responses.

An Historical Perspective

Looking over the last 40 years or so of education in Singapore, we can say that there were two major strands in the development of EL teaching in Singapore, founded on the distinction between EL1 (English as the first Language or medium of instruction) and EL2 (or English taught as the school's second language). The first strand, started in the colonial days, followed the tradition of English teaching in British schools with the teaching of English language and English literature closely interwoven.

The second strand of EL teaching began in the non-English medium schools at a time when we had the four language-medium model of schooling. EL2 methodology suited the needs of students in non-English medium schools, who acquired English principally for reading purposes.

The coming together of the two strands in the late 1960s could be attributed to several factors, the most important being the realisation that some of the methods developed under the label of EL2 would be applicable and useful to English-medium schools as well. With

the establishment of the national schools in 1987, and with English used as the medium of instruction for most subjects, the distinction between EL1 and EL2 has become rather blurred. Although the use of English has obviously spread within and outside formal schooling (see Table 1), nonetheless, the wide range of ability in English remains - some students being able to use it with great skill, and others less so. It is this range of ability in English that the English teachers have to grapple with each day in our schools.

Table 1. Proportion of Population Aged 10 Years and Older Literate in English by Ethnic Group

Ethnic Group \ Year	1980	1990
	Chinese	52.5
Malays	65.8	73.8
Indians	67.4	81.6
Others	94.6	92.6

Source: Singapore Census of Population 1990

The Present Study

This study is modelled on the one by Protherough and Atkinson (1992). The questionnaire administered, however, has been changed considerably to take into consideration professional issues related to EL teaching in Singapore. The emphasis is on EL teachers' views on the nature of EL teaching, how well they have been equipped to meet new developments in EL pedagogy and how they might be better prepared to keep in tandem with changes or perceived changes in EL teaching.

We sought the views of experienced EL teachers of different ages teaching in secondary schools, centralised institutes and junior colleges. We asked that only two EL teachers (from different age groups) in each school respond to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was purposefully detailed and allowed for open-ended answers. The responses were analysed, and although some findings were derived from the quantitative data, views expressed in the free responses served as valuable inputs for content analysis. The study looked at respondents' views in three dimensions - firstly, their perceptions of what influenced their development which included their views of teacher training; secondly, their views of how their teaching behaviour had changed with experience and with new directions in language teaching; and finally, their views of the qualifications or attributes needed for a career as an (effective) EL teacher. While we have collected a relatively rich data set, this paper presents only a few selected features of the data collected. This is only a *preliminary*

analysis.

The Respondents

In brief, a total of 238 EL teachers responded to a questionnaire survey, conducted in all secondary schools, centralised institutes and junior colleges. Out of the 300 questionnaires sent out, 77% of them were returned.

A profile of the respondents can be obtained from the personal background data. On the matter of age distribution, the respondents were relatively young (see Fig. 1), with the majority (42%), being in the age range of 30-39 years.

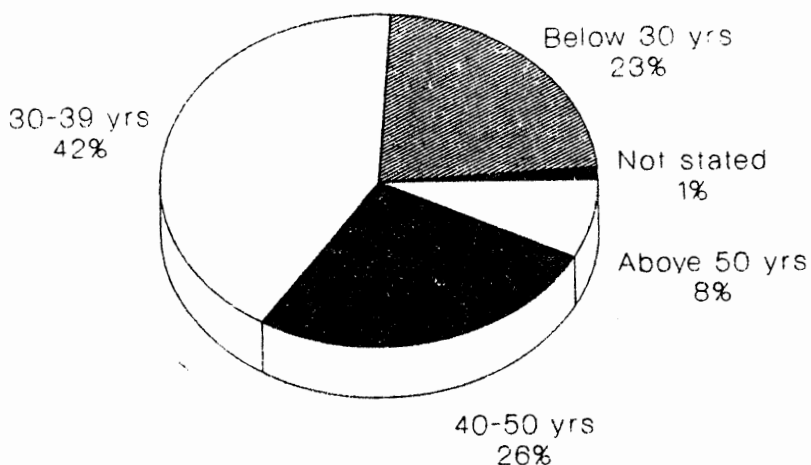


Fig. 1. Age Range of Respondents

Years of EL teaching experience of respondents ranged from 1 year to 38 years, with 53.8% having had at least 10 years of experience in English teaching (see Fig 2).

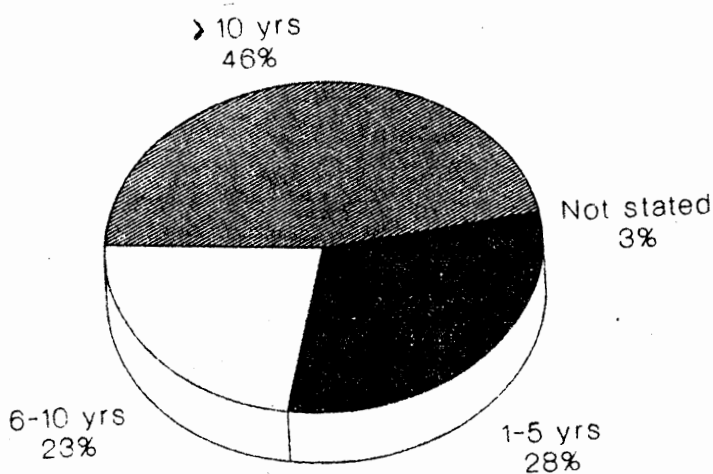


Fig. 2. Years of Teaching Experience

Women accounted for 84% of the respondents, a figure close to the percentage of female teachers in the teaching profession. In terms of educational qualifications, 82.8% are degree holders with 75.2% of them holding Bachelor of Arts degrees.

Selected Findings

Formative Influences

Out of the 10 factors listed in the Protherough and Atkinson (1992) study as being possible formative influences on English teachers' development, only five which are relevant to the local English language teaching situation were used in our questionnaire. Respondents were asked to rank the importance of each factor on a scale of '1' to '5' in an ascending order of influence. As in the Protherough and Atkinson's study, there were considerable differences in the rankings given to any item. The mean rankings for the five items are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Formative Influences on Teachers by Years of Teaching Experience

Factors	EL Teaching Experience		
	1-10 Yrs	> 10 yrs	Mean
Academic studies	3.75	3.75	3.75
Teacher training course	3.32	3.58	3.4
Other English teachers	3.50	3.34	3.4
In-service courses	3.14	3.37	3.25
Books or articles	3.32	3.64	3.38

The range of average rankings was relatively narrow, from a mean of 3.25 to 3.75. Of the five factors, '*Academic studies*' received the highest ranking with 59.6% of the teachers ranking it as of much or great importance in their development as teachers of EL. About 43% of the teachers ranked the factor '*Other English teachers*' as of much or great importance. An interesting profile of teachers' perceptions in relation to their years of EL teaching experience might be deduced from the above data. As noted in Fig 2, of the 238 teachers, 46% had more than 10 years of EL teaching experience while 51% had between 1 and 10 years of such experience. While both groups of teachers were unanimous in ranking '*Academic studies*' as of greatest importance among the five given items, their rankings of the other four factors differed. Teachers with more experience attributed great importance to the influence of books or articles on their professional development than those with fewer years of experience. This interestingly is similar to Protherough and Atkinson's (1992) UK study. Younger teachers, on the other hand, considered '*Other English teachers*' as an important formative influence in contrast to the older group which placed this factor least in

ranking. More experienced teachers too tended to give more weighting to *teacher training* and *in-service courses* than the younger teachers.

The trend of responses summarised above is not very surprising. Among the teachers with more years of teaching experience some of them would have been trained in EL2 methodology when, in teaching training in the past, a clearer distinction was made between EL1 and EL2. While some of the EL2 teaching methods are still applicable in the teaching of EL1, older teachers understandably attached great importance to books and professional articles as well as in-service courses to keep them up-to-date with the changing nature of EL teaching. Teachers with less than ten years of teaching experience would most likely have been trained in EL1 teaching methodology. While their training might equip them with competencies in handling the teaching of the subject, they acquired additional competencies through actual teaching, and not least, through interactions with other EL teachers. Hence their perception of the importance of 'other English teachers' in their development.

Influence of Initial Teacher Preparation

In contrast to Protherough and Atkinson's (1992) study, older teachers in our study were more likely to see teacher training as being of much or great importance than the younger teachers. Some 44% of the group with more than ten years of experience indicated that it was so for them as compared to only 36.1% of the younger group.

Responses to Question 6 of the questionnaire gave an indication of teachers' perception of the extent of their preparation for EL teaching. It must be emphasized at the outset that the teaching training curriculum has also changed in emphasis over the years, and some of the respondents were trained under earlier arrangements and others much later. Given this fact, of the 13 items concerning the English curriculum and other teaching activities, 74.1% of the 238 respondents felt that there was none or little preparation for 'working with children with special needs'. Some 60% were also of the view that they were not well prepared in 'book selection for class use' and in 'encouraging poetry reading and writing' and about 50% thought that they were not so effectively prepared in 'understanding how local children learn English', 'marking written work' and 'teaching across the whole ability range'. On the positive side, however, 88.3% of the respondents felt that their training had prepared them well in 'classroom management and control' and about 75% were of the view that their training had effectively prepared them in 'knowledge of grammar' and 'management of small group activities'. In sum, teachers felt that they benefited from their initial training, which explained the relatively substantial influence attributed to the teacher training course.

Differences in the responses of the older and younger groups to some items are interesting. The younger group were noticeably more inclined to the view that they were not well prepared in 'book selection for class use', 'teaching across the whole ability range' and 'understanding how local children learn English'. The item that showed the greatest difference of perception between the two groups was 'ways of working with technology and media'. Understandably, 50% of the older group felt that they were not well prepared while only 19% of the younger group thought so. This significant difference was not surprising as there was little or no emphasis on the use of information technology and computers when

teachers were trained in the 1970s or earlier. Another point of interest was that 10 of the 13 items were ranked lower by the younger group than the older group. Unlike Protherough and Atkinson's study (1992), our younger teachers seemed more critical than the older ones. It could also suggest that the training programmes did not fully meet the expectations of the younger teachers or that younger teachers' expectations were now much higher or that the school situation has changed. The more positive response from the older group might also suggest that their perception could be moderated by their years of teaching experience. The research literature does show that among teachers theoretical principles are better appreciated with experience. In the case of the older teachers, what was thought missing in initial teacher education was probably made up by additional competencies acquired on the job or in in-service courses.

Free responses to the question of omissions in their preparation were expressed in different ways, but they could be grouped through content analysis as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Items Cited as Major Omissions from the Preparation Course for EL Teaching

<u>Items</u>	<u>Percentage of respondents</u>
How to teach pupils with a whole range of ability	21%
How to tackle learning difficulties and remediation	20.1%
How to motivate pupils to learn English	25.2%
Setting and marking of tests and/or examination papers	26.4%
Total ¹	92.7%

(¹Others which make up the remaining 7.3% of the responses were items like time and stress management and skills like teaching comprehension, reading, etc)

Respondents did not express much concern about the handling of a less traditional and less grammar-based syllabus or greater emphasis on integrating EL skills. In the light of their teaching practice, respondents cited the items above (see Table 3) as the major omissions from their teacher training course. The first three were specifically related to teachers' experience with pupils' learning difficulties. The fact that 66.3% of the

respondents expressed this basic concern reflects an earlier response in which 74.1% of respondents were of the view that they were not adequately prepared to handle pupils with special needs. This response might also suggest that the training received did not prepare teachers well for the reality of classroom teaching in situations which sometimes encompass a wide range of (pupils') ability in English.

Changing Approaches to English Teaching

Respondents were asked about their views on how the nature of EL teaching had changed since they began teaching and how their teaching approach differed from what they started off with. Here again respondents gave a whole range of free responses. Respondents' comments were summarised through context analysis under two broad categories - content and approach.

Content: Briefly, about 35% described the change in the nature of EL teaching in terms of a shift in the content of their teaching. Then 40% of them described the change in the emphasis on grammar as the most significant. Grammar teaching was described by them as being 'more contextualised'; emphasis was more on 'fluency rather than accuracy'. Some saw grammar as one of the skills taught in a package of 'integration of skills'. Still on content, the rest described EL teaching as being more 'Process' and 'Thematic' in focus. Some also used the terms, 'flexibility' and 'comprehensive', to describe the breadth of content and others described the content of teaching as shifting 'from textbook-based to skills-based'.

Approach to teaching: Some 32.% of the respondents saw the change in EL teaching in terms of teaching approach. They were unanimous in describing it as a shift from a 'teacher-dominated' style to one of 'pupil-centredness'. Respondents described the present approach which was different from what they started with, as providing 'emphasis on the learner'. There was more focus on 'oral' and 'group work'. Pupils were engaged in more 'interactive and communicative' activities and 'drill method was obsolete'. It was described as 'more time-consuming' entailing 'more use of media' and 'material preparation' and 'teachers need to be more resourceful'.

Others: The remaining 32% of the respondents saw changes in very different ways. Some recurring ones were 'constraints in the education system' and education having 'more examination focus' requiring 'specific marking schemes and following specific guidelines', there being more 'emphasis on written work'.

In response to what they saw as the change in the nature of EL teaching, teachers also reflected on the change in their own teaching approach. They reported that they were more concerned about 'encouraging pupil participation' in their lessons and the lessons they taught were purposefully 'learner-based' as well as 'activity-based'. Teachers also described themselves as being 'more aware of skills teaching' and were consciously 'moving away from overt grammar teaching'; they were also more concerned about lesson preparation usually adopting a 'more structured and systematic approach' and making use of 'thematic' content. Several in fact reported that they were now more 'examination oriented' in their teaching. The responses of teachers in this section were

more or less consistent with the recent developments in language teaching.

Essential Attributes of Effective English Language Teachers

Respondents were asked what they thought were the essential qualities that (effective) EL teachers would have. Below is a sampling of a much longer list of qualities mentioned by respondents in their free responses. While the variety of answers ranges across personality traits, skills and knowledge level, for the purpose of discussion, 96% of the responses can be grouped under four discernible categories - knowledge, attitude, interest and personality, the last three being personal qualities.

Knowledge : About 56% of the respondents stressed that knowledge was essential. Areas of knowledge included 'having a good grounding in English language', 'having a good command of the language', having at least 'a basic degree' and 'majored in English language or literature at tertiary level' or having received 'RSA', 'proper' or 'real' training in English language; possessing 'good' and 'relevant' qualifications; being a 'proficient', 'fluent' and 'accurate' user of the language. A knowledge of teaching skills, too, was essential, especially 'good English language teaching skills'.

Attitude: Some 20% of the respondents cited 'attitude' as being essential in the making of an effective EL teacher. They described suitable attitudes as having a 'love for the language' and therefore having the 'willingness to explore' new approaches and 'new knowledge. Such teachers would 'understand their pupils' difficulties' and would 'attend full-time or part-time courses to upgrade their skills'. They would 'try a variety of methodologies' and be willing to 'motivate pupils to use the language'. Having the correct attitude would also prepare teachers to develop the 'stamina to mark the numerous number of assignments'.

Interest: About 11% spoke of 'interest in the language' as being important. Interest is manifested by their 'wide reading of a range of books and articles on English language' to sustain their interest in the development of the language and its teaching. It is also manifested by 'an awareness of the local arts scene, drama and literary writings'.

Personality: Another 9% gave emphasis to the 'personality' factor. An effective EL teacher besides having knowledge and skills would need to be 'self-confident' 'expressive' and possess 'enthusiasm', 'intelligence' and 'common sense' to handle the teaching of English Language well. Words like 'creative', 'patient' and 'persevering' were also used to describe the effective EL teacher.

Conclusion

The views and experiences of the 238 respondents, the practitioners themselves, in

our study indicate the importance EL teachers attached to knowledge of subject, particular personal qualities and professional preparation in the making of an effective EL teacher. Responses were not idiosyncratic as in the Davies study (1992). It is possible to group the responses. From the pattern of these responses, our local teachers show, in fact, a depth of knowledge of the changes in the nature of EL teaching and related professional issues in the local setting.

Teachers' emphasis on the lack of preparation to handle pupils with a wide range of ability in English and those with special needs reflects a real concern given the importance of the subject of EL in determining the education ladder of students in Singapore. The concern appears more urgent as teachers look ahead to the impending changes of the secondary school system in 1994. The views of respondents also suggest that they take their subject of specialisation seriously. Besides the question of personal qualities, their responses raised questions concerning the issue of competencies either learnt in teacher training courses or acquired through practice. These competencies have to do largely with teaching methodology and approach.

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