

Non-Specialist English Teachers' Pedagogical Content Knowledge in Teaching English At Tahfiz Schools

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ABSTRACT

Tahfiz schools are gaining popularity overtime. Thus, serious attention needs to be given to the overall systems in Tahfiz schools, especially the academic subjects and matters related to it. This is the focus of this study-the English teachers at Tahfiz schools who are normally non-specialist English teachers (NSETs), or teachers with no formal qualification to teach. Hence, this research aims to investigate the levels of the NSETs' Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). In determining the level of the NSETs' PCK, both theories of constructivist and Bandura are taken into consideration. This means, if the NSETs have a strong self-efficacy, which may arise from their experience, the unawareness of the NSETs might drive them to see PCK as unchallenging. An explanatory mixed-method was utilized with 34 NSETs obtained through snowball sampling. The findings revealed the NSETs have an intermediate level of PCK. It is important for the NSETs to have a series of pedagogical courses, that will broaden their knowledge in teaching English subject. Besides, a mentoring program with specialist English teachers from neighbouring government schools, seems beneficial to ensure that the NSETs will be at par in terms of knowledge and experience to the current education system.

Keywords: Non-specialist English Teachers; Pedagogical Content Knowledge; Tahfiz Schools, Education

INTRODUCTION

The existence of Tahfiz schools nowadays is undeniable especially amongst Malaysian Muslim parents. The attention on Tahfiz schools is growing continuously starting from 1970s (Fathil & Oktasari, 2017). However, studies related to teaching English subject or pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) at Tahfiz schools are found to be limited. Furthermore, Professor Dato' Dr. Abdul Halim Tamuri, who is one of the board members of Yayasan Selangor Islamic Education, in 2018 suggested to establish a training centre for academic Tahfiz teachers, which he claimed that the teachers have no standards of best practice in teaching (Amir, 2018). Thus, this study may appear as a needs analysis and contribute some information in representing the English teachers at Tahfiz schools. Hence, the objective of this study is to investigate the levels of the NSETs' Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pedagogical knowledge is defined as surpassing the knowledge of subject content; which teachers do not only understand the content of the subject yet possess the skills to deliver the content in any forms of effective teaching (Shulman, 1986). Teachers need to analyse what makes the learning of subject content difficult. This is because, they need to have justification in deciding on their pedagogy to ensure it is effective for the students.

According to Meyer (2004), teachers' own experience acts as prior knowledge in developing the PCK. Teachers might construct their knowledge based on what they have experienced either as a student, or in their first year of being a teacher. The influenced of their previous teachers, when they were a student plays an important role in shaping the teachers' prior knowledge of PCK. The NSETs are believed to rely on their experience the most as they did not learn about pedagogy.

Then, the attitude of the teachers also contributes to the development of PCK. The positive the teacher, the better the PCK. Kepol (2017) studies on the attitude of teachers, where he found, the positive attitude leads to the quality improvement as well as effected the teachers' character. This means a teacher will be a better teacher when they have positive attitude, not only in their PCK but also in person. Attitude then can be said to enhance character building.

PCK also can be improved with the influenced of mentor. Mann and Tang (2012) state in their study about the important role of mentoring on novice teachers, which they claim to be beneficial for the teachers' professional development. Having a mentor will help teachers, especially the NSETs to understand about pedagogy better than experimenting. This experimenting, which is called as "trial and error method" (Kabilan & Izzaham, 2008, p.92), is a good approach, but it takes time. Whereas, when a teacher has a mentor or a guidance, it will accelerate the development of PCK of the teachers, rather than learning through experiencing.

Another source that can help teachers to improve their PCK is through their colleagues. This is almost the same as having a mentor, but colleagues sound friendlier, and that makes colleagues to be one of the important sources in teachers' PCK development. This is supported by Farrell (2015), who states about how his fellow teachers act as his source of motivation during his

novice teacher phase. Albers (2008) on the other hand, highlights the significance of working as a team, where the experience of each member becomes a guideline for the novice teammates. This is supported by the study of Hammond and Gibbons (2005), who emphasize the experienced colleagues that act as a framework in helping the teachers to build new knowledge. Hence, in this study, the sources of the NSETs' pedagogical content knowledge are going to be detected.

METHODS

This study aims to find out the non-specialist English teachers' level of pedagogical content knowledge. Thus, this study used an explanatory mixed-method where the quantitative approach is followed by the qualitative approach (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003). According to Ivankova, Creswell and Stick (2006), this method starts with collecting and analysing the quantitative data; normally a survey using a questionnaire, then followed by the qualitative approach to get an in-depth explanation on the specific domain from the quantitative part.

Questionnaire and semi-structured interview are the instruments used in answering the research question of this study. The questionnaire was adopted and adapted from a study by Kilic (2009) as well as survey questions from National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The adopt and adapt approaches were used due to the limitation in finding past literatures or previous studies on English teachers at Islamic schools.

In selecting the sample, snowball sampling was utilized with an intention to maximise the number of participants who were willing to participate in this study. As the total number of the population is quite difficult to be obtained, the snowball sampling shed light for the researchers to conduct this study. The final number of 34 participants had been obtained, who originated from different states of Malaysia. In snowball sampling, the researchers of the study would ask the identified participants to find other possible participants, possibly from their mutual connection or might be their own colleagues (Creswell, 2012).

As for the qualitative part, three participants are labelled as ETiv1, ETiv2 and ETiv3. 'ET' is an abbreviation of English Teacher, 'iv' is for the interview, and the number presents the three conducted interviews consecutively. The data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed using SPSS version 25 and as for the interviews, thematic analysis was done.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the survey and interviews conducted with the NSETs on their Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). There are 34 and three NSETs involve in the questionnaire and interviews respectively.

i. Findings of Questionnaires

In this section, there are three themes included; fellow teachers, teaching methods and technology used in teaching English.

Table 1
 Statistical Findings of Pedagogical Content Knowledge

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| I share English subject teaching materials with my colleagues. | 34 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.8529 | 1.0190 |
| I refer to senior English teachers at my school in deciding of what to teach in my English class. | 34 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 4.0882 | .9960 |
| I refer to any online materials that are available to structure my English language teaching. | 34 | 2.00 | 5.00 | 4.0294 | .7582 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 34 | | | | |

Domain “I share English subject teaching materials with my colleagues” is the highest obtained mean ($X=3.8529$, $SD=1.0190$) under the theme of ‘fellow teacher’. Then, domain “I refer to senior English teachers at my school in deciding of what to teach in my English class” with the mean score of 4.0882 ($SD=.9960$), showing that the teachers agreed that they quite rely on their senior teachers. This indicates that their senior or experienced colleagues play a quite significant role in shaping their pedagogical knowledge. This is in line with the statement of a study, which found that experienced teachers or “mentors”, the term that used in the study, play a pivotal role in the novice teachers’ professional development (Mann & Tang, 2012). This situation leads to the theory of scaffolding, where the experienced colleagues provide supporting system normally for the novice teachers, and for this study, the NSETs. This is because, the experienced colleagues will act as “temporary supporting structures” (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005) to help the NSETs to build new knowledge, beliefs, and skills. The highest mean score obtained for the last theme ($X=4.0294$, $SD=.7582$) is for the domain “I refer to any online materials that are available to structure my English language teaching”, indicating a quite strong agreement on the use of online sources in their pedagogy.

Table 2
The Non-specialist English Teachers' Overall Analysis of PCK

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------------|----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|
| PCK | 34 | 2.30 | 4.70 | 3.7235 | .4949 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 34 | | | | |

The mean score obtained ($X=3.7235$, $SD=.4949$) showing that the teachers belong to the intermediate level (mean obtained in the range of 2.00 to 3.90) for their pedagogical content knowledge.

i. Findings of Interviews

Three interviewees with different Bachelor's degree were selected. ETiv1 has a Bachelor's degree in Pharmacology from a university in Australia, ETiv2 has a Bachelor's degree in Marine Technology from a local university, and ETiv3 has a Bachelor's degree in Commerce and Management from a university in Japan, and additional certificate in teaching English from a university in United Kingdom. In the three interviews, the interviewees gave almost the same response when they were asked about their familiarity with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). They were unfamiliar with the terms but admitted that they have used CLT. The following section is the analysis of the qualitative part of this study.

ETiv1:

"No, this is basically mix and match, try and error" (ETiv1, lines 61).

ETiv1 admitted that he did not know about the specific names of teaching methods as he attempts several different approaches to teach English subject to his students. This is aligned with the study of Kabilan and Izzaham (2008) who claimed that this trial-and-error method as an experiment that will cost times.

I was hoping that there might be a session where you do it, or there's a situation where people do the various techniques and I want to watch as well... but I would like to see the other difference techniques. I don't even know what my technique is... [laughing] the proper name I won't know" (ETiv1, lines 62 – 68).

His response showing that he would like to explore his own teaching approaches. He also asked the researchers to contact him if there will be a course about pedagogy that he can attend. As he already teaches English subject for three years, he stated that he is more familiar with the contents of the English subject, and that helps him to improve and smoothen his teaching. This can be interpreted as improvement through experience, which can also be related to the theory of constructivist. This is because, ETiv1 used his experience when learning English subject to construct his teaching approach when he is an English subject teacher.

ETiv2:

“I can say that...it just a pure luck for me to meet them” (ETiv2, lines 172 – 173).

ETiv2 claimed to be in “pure luck” as he treasures his relationship with his previous colleagues, especially the heads of English committee when he was working at the two government schools. He then elongates his connection to District Education Office, wherever he teaches. This is to ensure that he is up to date in terms of contents, as well as to solve his pedagogy issue.

“because of the... English panitia in my previous school. Every school I go, the first thing is I have to meet the... the head of panitia and I will learn anything that he... he or she can teach me” (ETiv2, lines 73-75).

What he has done is aligned with the study of Albers (2008), who stated that workmates are beneficial in solving the issues regarding works. Besides, this shows the significance of working as a team, where experience of each member works as a guideline for novice teammates (Albers, 2008). ETiv2 can be claimed as an independence learner, in exploring his insufficient knowledge of teaching English. This is also regarding to the attitude of teachers, that leads to the improvement of the teachers’ quality, which also effects the teachers’ character (Kepol, 2017). In short, teachers with positive attitude will not only improve their knowledge but also develop their own character.

ETiv3:

From the interview with ETiv3, it is clear that experience helps in forming the teachers’ knowledge. Although he said he was not familiar with the term of CLT, the researcher believes that he has practised the CLT, according to the following quote;

“... you learn a... certain situation and then from there you extract what’s the grammar behind it, what’s the vocabulary behind it, what’s the writing styles behind it...” (ETiv3, line 43 – 45)

ETiv3 explained on how he teaches vocabulary and grammar to his students. He actually employed the CLT method, specifically a role play, where he gave a situation for students to engage in, then the vocabulary and grammar will come out or extract from it.

Thus, in determining the level of the NSETs’ PCK, it is also reasonable to place them in an intermediate level. This is because, statistically they are proven to be in the intermediate level. Moreover, in the interviews, constructivism is quite obvious, where the teachers’ experiences play a major role in developing their teaching practice.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the pedagogical content knowledge of non-specialist English teachers (NSETs) at Tahfiz schools. The findings of this study show that the NSETs are in the intermediate level of PCK, where they need guidance from specialist teachers to improve their knowledge. This

is because, the NSETs agreed the most with the domain “I refer to senior English teachers at my school in deciding of what to teach in my English class” ($X=4.0882$, $SD=.9960$), indicating that their senior or experienced colleagues play a quite significant role in shaping their pedagogical knowledge. This is in line with the statement of Mann and Tang (2012), where they found that experienced teachers or “mentors”, the term that they use in their study, play a pivotal role in the novice teachers’ professional development.

In the search of previous literature, the researchers found a limited number of studies that focussed on English teachers in Tahfiz setting. This leads to several limitations, starting with determining the population of this study, which leads to the second limitation, that is decreasing the chance to maximise the number of participants of this study. Only 34 NSETs were detected, and this number is not enough to make a generalisation represents the whole NSETs’ population.

A series of pedagogy courses should be introduced for the sake of NSETs’ betterment. This course is prominent in order for the NSETs to be able to have effective pedagogy. Inspired by the initiative of ETiv2, a mentoring program involving the neighbouring government schools is needed. This is to ensure that the NSETs will not be left behind in the current education system. As this present study utilises questionnaire and interview, observation can be conducted for future study to get the real pedagogy situation at Tahfiz schools so that more transparent analyses can be done.

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About the Authors

Zarith Sofia Zaid is a novice teacher who believes that learning is a lifelong lesson. Her interest is on topic that is common in Malaysia but almost no study has been done, such as non-specialist teachers.

Holding on to the belief of “teach others as how you want others to teach you”, Assoc. Prof. Dr Siti Maftuhah Damio has experienced teaching various learners from novices to professionals. Her vast teaching experience provides a strong framework in training future English teacher, as per her current involvement. Researching, innovating and publishing has strengthen her field expertise.

A self—directed and tireless primary school teacher with 5+ years of experience, Nur Hazura Mat Rahim seeks to escalate her students’ social and academic growth by bettering herself in developing inspiring hands-on lessons that will capture a child’s imagination and breed success.