

Conceptual Framework on Language Teacher Cognition (LTC) in Classroom Interactions and The Facilitation of Students' Speaking Skill at Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR) Schools

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Abstract

This ongoing doctoral level study plans to conduct direct observation to twelve speaking classrooms in six private Secondary Agama Rakyat schools in Perak, Malaysia. Based on one of construct of Borg's LTC framework (2003), which is classroom practices, together with the Sinclair and Coulthard IRF framework (1975), this study plans to investigate the relationship between teacher cognition and student-teacher classroom interaction patterns. In other words, this study will examine how LTC influences teacher-students' patterns of interaction with the purpose of stimulating and strengthening students' speaking skill in speaking classrooms at SAR schools in Perak. This proposed research will also extend the LTC framework by looking beyond the beliefs and teaching practices of teachers and taking into consideration the actual learning experiences of their students.

Keyword: LTC, SAR, IRF, Integrated Islamic Schools, Classroom Interaction, Triadic Dialogue

Introduction

Background of the Study

The institutionalization of Islamic schools in Malaysia is partly due to an issue which once created a heated discussion among the Muslim scholars in the 1990s namely the dualism in the education system. Dualism in education is defined as the existence of two systems of education, be it in a smaller or larger national context. With regard of Islamic schools, it refers to the separate implementation of the national, modern secular and the traditional, Islamic religious systems (Rahimah, 2019). It was said that dualism failed to produce successful Islamic personalities with those graduated from the secular education system frequently

described as professionals absent in religious values. Vice versa, those with strong traditional religious education were said to possess the ability to become Islamic experts, however, failed to contribute actively in society, and are unable to provide critical and creative thoughts in dealing with current issues (Siddiq et al., 2018).

In response to the issue, some Islamic scholars from the Muslim nations have proposed a harmonious fusion of both the traditional and modern Westernized educational system and according to Rahimah (2019), this newly proposed idea later served as the impetus to the emergence of the contemporary modern integrated Islamic schools (IIS) all over the world.

Undeniably, these schools have attracted many parents who are interested in their proposed educational policy, which is a balance between the academic and Islamic education. This strengthens the belief of Muslims who believe that true success is when a person strives not only for happiness in this world but also for the hereafter. It is a pull factor that many Muslim parents find hard to resist, despite many complaints received, especially from the aspects of the school governance, which in turn affect the performance of the schools as a whole (Mukhlis, 2018).

Integrated Islamic Schools (IIS) in Malaysia

Based on a study carried out by the Advisory Board for the Coordination of Islamic Education or Lembaga Penyelaras dan Pendidikan Agama Islam (LEPAI) as cited in Azmil Tayeb (2018), in general there are four types of IIS in Malaysia:

- i. Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama (SMKA) which are fully managed by the Ministry of Education;
- ii. Sekolah Agama Negeri (SAN), managed by the respective State Departments of Religious Affairs
- iii. Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan (SABK)
- iv. Private Sekolah Agama Rakyat or Agama Rakyat Schools (SAR) that are operated and managed by non-governmental Islamic organizations such as Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM) or the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, Jemaah Islam Malaysia (JIM) and even private individuals.

Malaysian CEFR-aligned curriculum and Communicative Language Teaching

In Malaysia, the inclusion of English as a subject in the national education curriculum has made it mandatory and it has been institutionalized as the second most important language of the country (MoE, 2012). In improving the overall standard of English language among Malaysian students, the Ministry of Education has executed the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) aligned curriculum (Rashid et al., 2017) which serves as the international benchmark in preparing the syllabus, textbooks and assessments.

Meanwhile, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) can be described as the mainstream language teaching approach which emphasises on communicative competence as the aim of language teaching and learning (Ketsemabom & Kornwipa, 2018). CLT is seen to be a potential approach to language teaching as it focuses on developing learners' communicative competence in the target language especially with the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in Malaysian primary and secondary education

(Hafizah & Parilah, 2019). In other words, The Malaysian CEFR-aligned curriculum promotes CLT (Akuli & Poonpon, 2018), therefore all language teachers are expected to incorporate CLT in their language classrooms.

With that, SAR schools are definitely, without exception, to implement the current national CEFR-aligned curriculum and to conform to the language teaching and learning aspects embodied in the CLT approach in their language. Besides that, they are required to register under the corresponding State Islamic Religious Departments for the purpose of channeling financial and technical assistance (Nurulhayati, 2017).

Problem Statement

However, SAR schools are not without problems. Time and again, the media and the local communities will highlight the issue of low English language performance in SAR schools in national standardised examinations compared to other schools (Haimi, 2017; Asmaliza, 2018; KPM, 2012; Nur Farhana et.al, 2022; Nurulhayati & Che Ton, 2016). Othman (2018), the then Assistant Director of the Education Division in Penang State Department of Islam (JAIPP) for instance, claims that most of the students at private Islamic schools including both SABK and SAR do not possess a commendable level of English proficiency and this will make it difficult for them to compete in the era of globalization. Malik (2019) while holding the position as Minister of Education of Malaysia in 2018 added that private Islamic schools should improve their students' command in English to continue to remain as relevant educational institutions in the future. However, according to Yaacob (2022), the reality is quite difficult considering that many students majoring in Islamic studies and Arabic in Malaysia are less concerned with mastering the English language either in writing or speaking.

Due to these factors, some researchers have conducted studies which involved direct observations on the language teaching and learning (T&L) process in SAR schools with the purpose of identifying the causes of the decline in the students' English language performance. A study by Nurulhayati and Che Ton (2016), for instance, examined how English language was taught in nine private self-funded Islamic secondary schools (SAR) in Perak. They found that chief amongst all drawbacks is the limited capital resources that negatively affect not only the development of school infrastructure but also the language classroom pedagogical practices. This can be clearly seen when most schools fail to provide computers and ICT facilities in every class observed. More worryingly, almost all English language teachers there were merely SPM leavers without any teaching qualifications and were rarely sent to continue professional development or in-service courses to improve their pedagogical skills and professionalism (Baba, 2021). Besides that, most of the teachers were found to have spent more than 60% of their student-teacher classroom interactions in the students' mother tongue (Nurulhayati & Haimi, 2015; Nurulhayati & Che Ton, 2016). It was also the students' primary mode of communication when speaking with their peers throughout the lessons. Rote learning, a traditional learning strategy, which was used in the students' Quranic recitation sessions to prepare them to become Tahfiz, was the most common language learning strategy used by the students both inside and outside of the language classroom. (Asmaliza, 2018; Baba, 2021).

All of the above constraints, if left unchecked, could continue to be among the main causes which lead to the decline in English language achievement in SAR schools. It is indeed

worrying, given that once these students leave school, they will be expected to continue their education at higher education colleges and universities where English will be used as the main language of instruction. If they fail to demonstrate outstanding English ability at secondary school level, questions may arise pertaining to their readiness to pursue tertiary level education. Immediate action should be taken to address the problem and further improve the English language performance in these schools.

Theoretical Framework

Before continuing with the research objectives, the researcher feels there is a need to explain briefly about two theoretical frameworks that underlie this study, namely first, Language Teacher Cognition (Borg, 2003) and second, Triadic Dialogue (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). This is because the combination of these frameworks act as the basis for the construction of this study's research objectives and eventually, its research questions.

The first framework to be employed is Language Teacher Cognition (Borg, 2003), or LTC which can be defined as what teachers "think, know, and believe and the relationships of these mental constructs to what teachers do in the language teaching classroom" (p. 1). It discusses the reality of the teachers' continuous mental construct, i.e., their knowledge, beliefs, and practices in context of their multifaceted profession. He further conceptualized four elements that constantly influence language teacher cognition, namely (i) schooling experience, (ii) professional teacher education, (iii) school contextual factors and (iv) classroom teaching practices.

On the other hand, classroom interaction and students' language development has long become one of the key-focus in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) in his classroom discourse framework called The Triadic Dialogue claims that the simplest and most common teacher-student cycle of interaction occurs in a communicative classroom usually consists of three moves: an initiation (I-Move), normally by the teacher initiates a question, a response (R-Move), where a student attempts to respond to the question, and a follow-up move (F-Move), in which the teacher provides some form of feedback to the student's responses. A sample of a complete IRF cycle is as below:

Teacher:	What is the capital of Ecuador?	I
Student:	Quito.	R
Teacher:	Well done!	F

However, it is the responsibility of the teachers to manipulate this simplest cycle of communication to elicit new thoughts and responses from the students, which will force them to participate in longer, negotiated, genuine linguistic interactions and facilitate their language (Kalpana, 2017).

As mentioned in subsection 1.4, all kinds of constraints plaguing the SAR school demand a deeper observation into what actually happens in the language teaching and learning ecosystem in those schools. Therefore, this research plans to investigate the relationship between LTC and classroom practices by examining the teacher-student classroom interaction patterns in English language speaking classrooms at a few SAR secondary schools in the state of Perak. Direct classroom observation is deemed necessary because it provides first-hand information on the moment-to-moment events happening in the language settings (Jandar,

2017). Plus, the main reason why the schools' English-speaking classrooms have been selected is because that is where the most teacher-students' interactions are expected to occur. Based on the factors that have been discussed above, this study will link its outcomes with few research objectives.

Research Questions

Based on all the aforementioned issues, three research questions have been operationalised to guide this study from beginning to the end.

1. What are the teachers' existing knowledge and beliefs pertaining to the role of IRF-Moves in the teacher-student classroom interactions in facilitating students' speaking skill?
2. How do the teachers facilitate the IRF-Moves in in the teacher-student classroom interactions to help improve their students' speaking skill?
3. How do the students facilitate the IRF-Moves in the teacher-student classroom interactions to help improve their speaking skill?
4. According to the teachers, what are the reasons for the probable congruences and incongruences between the theory and practice which occur throughout the teacher-student classroom interaction patterns?

Literature Review

Language Teacher Cognition

In his framework on Language Teacher Cognition, Borg (2003, 2006) defines LTC as what teachers:

[...] think, know, and believe and the relationships of these mental constructs to what teachers do in the language teaching classroom. The key questions addressed in teacher cognition research include the following: What do teachers have cognitions about, how do these cognitions develop, how do they interact with teacher learning and how do they interact with classroom practice? (p. 1)

Further, he conceptualized four central constructs that constantly mediate language teacher cognition, namely (i) schooling experience, (ii) professional teacher education, (iii) school contextual factors and (iv) classroom teaching practices (see Figure 1.1).

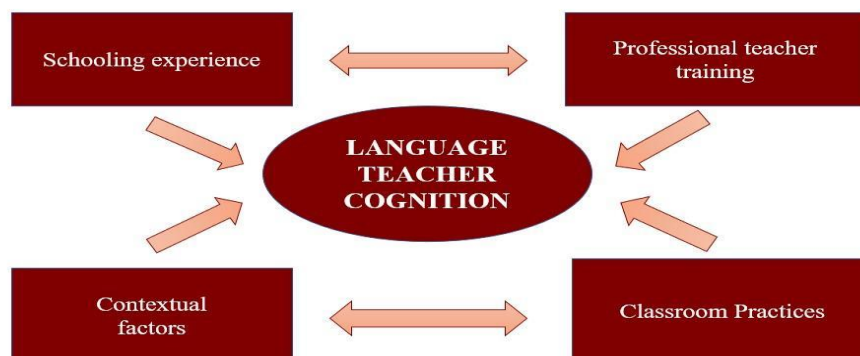


Figure 2.1. Borg's modified language teacher cognition framework (2006, p. 283)

This model depicts the interconnections between four central constructs that impact language teacher cognition. First, the experiences of teachers as language learners in schools before commencing their formal language teacher training and/or professional courses influence and shape their early beliefs of being a teacher. Second, their learning experiences gained through their formal teacher training or in-service professional development courses are important aspects that influence their existing beliefs. Third, the model also demonstrates a relationship between language teacher cognition and their internal classroom practices which involve among others, their perceptions about themselves as teachers, their learners, knowledge about the subject they teach, the environment in which they work and how these elements continuously impact their classroom instructional decisions. The fourth component demonstrates that the management of schools, time restrictions, mandated curricula, high-stakes tests and exams, environmental constraints, as well as planned and unplanned parts of teaching, all have a significant impact on teachers' classroom practices (Basturkmen, 2012).

Framework Two – Triadic Dialogue

Despite the large number of participants, the spoken texts of classroom interaction, especially those involving the teacher and the entire class are found to be structured in typical forms of discourse i.e., in accordance with certain repetitive patterns. According to Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), one of the most well-known forms of classroom discourse is the "triadic conversation," also referred to as the IRF sequence (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). The authors claim that in a communicative classroom, the simplest and most frequent cycle of teacher-student interaction consists of three moves: an initiation (I-Move), which frequently takes the form of a teacher question, a response (R-Move), in which a student makes an attempt to answer the question, and a follow-up move (F-Move), in which the teacher offers some kind of feedback to the student's response. As an illustration of a whole IRF cycle, consider discursive energy and inventiveness (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975).

Teacher:	What is the capital of Ecuador?	I
Student:	Quito.	R
Teacher:	Well done!	F

Third-turn – From Feedback to 'Follow-Up'

However, The IRF cycle's brief and straightforward design has drawn criticism for failing to spark more substantial and protracted exchanges that would have fostered communicative competence (Vijayarajam, 2017; Eisenring & Margana, 2019). Its rigid triadic pattern reflects the kind of interactions in traditional, teacher-fronted classrooms that does not generate adequate language output by students.

To compensate for the limited communication at the third round, some authors have suggested that the third-turn in this triadic IRF sequence, if carefully modified, could promote genuine interaction (Zaswita, 2022; Jaeger, 2019). Mortimer and Machado (2000) proposed that if the teacher's restricted evaluative feedback at the F-Move is extended by probing different styles of 'Follow-up' questions, it could elicit new thoughts and responses from the students, as they will be forced to participate in negotiated, genuine linguistic interactions. At this point, longer referential questions should be utilised instead of display questions. Referential questions are higher level inquiries that could inspire students to

think critically and creatively, whereas display questions are simpler inquiries for which the solutions are readily available in the teaching materials being used (Borzogian & Fallah, 2017; Zaswita, 2022; Vijayaratnam, 2017). Therefore, when the teacher takes the initiative to change the third-turn interaction pattern beyond the traditional method by opening more space for discussion and further thinking, providing more speaking practices that will help in developing their language competence. This is what the researcher intends to do in this study, which is to see how the teachers manipulate the third-turn at each conversation from using simple evaluative feedback to utilizing several effective follow-up probes to assist students in sharpening their speaking skill.

Methodology

Data collection methods

In order to examine the quality and success of classroom interaction in this study, this mixed method research design plans to adopt few data collection methods.

Data Collection Procedures

The following explanation briefly illustrates the entire design study. First, a set of demographic questionnaires will be administered to all English language teachers at SAR secondary schools in the northern state of Perak in Peninsular Malaysia. Part A of the questionnaire consists of a set of questions to obtain their details such as age, gender, highest academic qualification, years of service, reasons for choosing to teach English and number of hours spent in joining teaching professional courses. Part B of the questionnaire includes questions that are developed to investigate their basic knowledge of IRF moves in classroom interactions and how it assists the development of students' speaking skills. The results of the analysis will be summarized and presented in forms of frequencies (F), Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) and presented in forms of tables and graphs.

Second, for the qualitative data collection, a pre-observation semi-structured interview will be held with four selected teachers to obtain in-depth information about (i) their stated belief on the effectiveness of IRF-Moves in stimulating learners' speaking skills as well as (ii) specific information on how they plan to apply the IRF-Moves in their next speaking class.

Third, classroom observations will be conducted involving each of the selected four teachers. Each of them will be observed in 2 x 70-minute speaking lesson classrooms to investigate how both teacher and learners manipulate their IRF-Moves to identify the observable language teaching and learning behaviours that probably occur throughout each lesson. All lessons will be audio/video recorded for further analysis.

Fourth, since it is impossible to have the teachers and students explain and justify their thoughts and behaviours during the lesson, the best way to obtain the participants' retrospective verbal accounts to explain their actions is through a stimulated recall interview that will be carried out with four teachers and several selected students to justify their observable teaching and learning behaviours (Jandar, 2017). Prior to this, the researcher will play the recorded classroom observations to the teacher and students to elicit some explanations for the observable teaching and learning instances recorded during the lesson.

Finally, as the closing step in the data collection process for this study, a post-observation interview will be held with each teacher. All data gathered during teacher and student-stimulated recall interviews, as well as the classroom observation audio/video recordings, will be presented again to allow teachers to provide in-depth information and justifications on the reasons for the probable congruences and incongruences that may occur throughout their instructions.

Each procedure and data collection method using the research tool employed for each step will be explained in detail in the subtopic of Data Collection Procedures.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data will be derived from two methods, namely the demographic survey which uses Demographic Survey Questionnaire. The results of the analysis will be summarized and presented in forms of frequencies (F), Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) and presented in forms of tables and graphs.

On the other hand, the quality of the classroom interactions will be measured by identifying the degrees of the nature of classroom interaction (Galegane, 2015). This was done by categorising the lessons into the three groups as summarized in the table below.

Table 3.4

Three categories of quality classroom interaction (Galegane, 2015).

GRADE	CHARACTERISTICS.
A (BETTER LEVEL OF INTERACTIVE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The whole lesson time possesses a dialogic pattern of interaction. ● The students talk more than the teacher ● The students provide numerous responses which will be detailed by the number of sentences provided ● The whole lesson transaction indicates a number of lengthy teaching exchanges ● There are a number of strands in each lesson transaction. ● In conclusion, the length of the strands indicated quality student-centred interactive classrooms.
B (GOOD LEVEL OF INTERACTIVE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The lesson transaction has a combination of both dialogic and monologic patterns of interaction. ● The students at some points of the lesson transaction talk more than the teacher ● However, there were some points where the teacher talks more than the students ● About half of the students' responses were evident within a lesson transaction while the other half was made up of the teacher talk ● There is a combination of both lengthy teaching exchanges and very short ones. ● The strands are evident within the teaching exchange but are less compared to the 'better' category.
C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The lesson transaction possesses a strict IRF pattern of interactions.

(AVERAGE LEVEL OF INTERACTIVE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● The teacher talks more than the students● The student provides minimal responses in short sentences● Sometimes the student responds in only one word● The whole lesson transaction indicated very short teaching exchanges● In most cases only one or two strands are evident in each lesson transaction indicating a teacher-centred, traditional classroom.
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The researcher suggests that these three categories are also employed while analysing the qualitative data of this study.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The analysis of the qualitative data analysis will be based on Creswell (2014) Six Stages of Qualitative Data Analysis. The mass of qualitative data obtained from the pre-observation interviews, audio-video recordings of the classroom events, both interview protocols (teachers and students) and the post-observation interviews will be transcribed verbatim. They were then organized, summarized with the irrelevant data discarded. The data gained will be carefully read again to identify all statements related to the research questions. Each data will be coded and categorized. Any relevant student-teacher utterances will be organized and placed under its appropriate code. Once the first coding is completed, the researcher will be analysed more to look for patterns in the codes. In looking for the specific patterns which emerged from the analysis, the researcher will identify among all, (i) the most demonstrated third-turn follow-ups, (ii) the most learning behaviours (iii) the causes of both teaching and learning behaviours possessed by both teachers and students (iv) and the strategies involved for dealing with the congruences and incongruences with regard to the teacher beliefs. Later, the emerging themes and categories will be interpreted to answer all the research questions pertaining the language teachers' cognition on classroom interaction and how it helps to improve students' speaking skill. Every detailed discussion will be supported with evidence in the form of teacher-students transcription excerpts, which portray the desired behaviours.

Discussion and Conclusion

This proposed research holds significance across various domains. Firstly, it sheds light on the pivotal roles of SAR schools within the Malaysian educational landscape. The burgeoning popularity of SAR schools is attributed to parents' awareness regarding the challenges of raising children in the contemporary world. The escalating social issues among Malaysian adolescents prompt parents to turn to religion as a means of safeguarding their children from these concerns. Consequently, an increasing number of parents are opting to educate their children with Islamic knowledge, aligning with both worldly and spiritual needs.

Furthermore, this research is poised to augment the existing body of knowledge pertaining to the dynamics of second language teaching and learning in classrooms. Prior studies have revealed deficiencies in creating conducive environments that enhance students' speaking skills in some language classrooms within Sekolah Agama Rakyat SAR schools. The findings could serve as a foundational reference for teachers to identify their strengths and weaknesses in classroom interactions, allowing for the retention and improvement of

effective teacher-student interaction methods. Additionally, any identified weaknesses could prompt educators to devise more meaningful, effective, and efficient teaching practices.

Lastly, examining Language Teaching Competence (LTC) through the lens of teacher-student classroom interaction patterns holds promise for enhancing the quality of these interactions and reinforcing students' speaking proficiency. According to Borg (2021), teachers often grapple with conflicting issues, experiencing congruences or incongruences between theories and practices. For example, a teacher advocating for maximal use of the target language may encounter congruences with proficient students but incongruences with lower-proficient ones due to language barriers. This necessitates teachers to adapt and modify their interaction patterns. This research thus timely contributes to LTC by not only considering teachers' beliefs and experiences but also gaining valuable insights from students as learners in the English language classroom.

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