

Assessing Interpersonal Skills: The Needs for Assessment Model for ESL Trainee Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal skills are being debated as important skills in joining today's workforce in order to contribute to the effectiveness and competency in the working world. The quality of teaching is thus a crucial factor in promoting effective learning in schools. Teacher social skills are important for teachers to be able to deliver high-quality teaching and promote effective learning among the students. The attainment of these skills will make a difference in the quality of teaching and effective learning. However, employers report that graduates lack the interpersonal skills needed to be possessed by undergraduates upon graduation. Besides that, as stated by Tang and Tan (2015), although novice teachers are generally well-equipped with the content knowledge and are academically proficient, they lack interpersonal skills. The assessment of soft skills is much more complicated to be done compared to the assessment of hard skills or technical skills. Therefore, there is a need for the assessment of interpersonal skills to be done. This thus highlights the need to develop an assessment model to assess interpersonal skills among Malaysian undergraduates. This research aims at investigating the need of having a systematic model to assess trainee teachers' development of interpersonal skills. A semi-structured interview was carried out with four school English teachers and three English Education lecturers. All the participants interviewed have experience in supervising English trainee teachers. The results garnered highlighted the problems that ESL trainee teachers faced in schools during their teaching practice. The result also stressed on the importance of having an assessment model to assess interpersonal skills for ESL trainee teachers.

Keywords: Interpersonal skills, ESL trainee teachers, assessment model

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysian Education system is now in favour of the 21st century skills. The Malaysian government is working hard towards equipping the future generation with the interpersonal skills that they need in order to be proactive workforce when they start working (Airil Haimi Mohd Adnan, Sangeeth Ramalingam, Nurulhayati Ilias and Tahirah Mt Tahir, 2014). The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 has in fact highlighted that there is a need to equip students with the 21st century skills in order to produce holistic, entrepreneurial and balanced graduates. Students' learning experiences by increasing the use of experiential and service learning in them to develop the 21st-century skills. In 2017, Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) published the Malaysian Qualification Framework (MQF) (2nd ed). In the publication, it was stated that the learning outcome of a tertiary education program interpersonal skills including communication skills and leadership skills must be the focus of functional work skills which is one of the five clusters of learning outcomes. This resonates with the government's effort in making future graduates to be prepared with interpersonal skills needed in the working world as announced by the Ministry of Higher Education in 2016. Interpersonal skills component needs to be introduced by public universities in Malaysia (Tang, Tan, Uma Devi, 2015).

Hayes (2005) defined interpersonal skills as goal-directed behaviours used in face-to-face interactions in order to bring about a desired state of affairs. He drew on this definition after synthesizing the definitions of interpersonal skills by Argyle (1984) and Honey (1988). Argyle defined socially competent people as those who

possess the skills necessary to produce desired effects on other people in social situations. Meanwhile, Honey claimed that people use skills in face-to-face encounters to arrange their behaviour in line with their objectives. Based on the two definitions, Hayes came up with his definition of interpersonal skills i.e. one of a number of broadly similar terms that are sometimes used interchangeably. Other such terms include interactive skills, people skills, face-to-face skills, social skills, social competence (Hayes, 2005) and employability skills (Doyle, 2018).

Interpersonal skills are being debated as the skills that are important in joining today's workforce in order to contribute to effectiveness and competency in the working world (Tapia-Gutierrez and Cubo- Delgado, 2015). As conjured by Tang (2011), interpersonal skills are important and necessary during the 21st century. Further supported by the finding from Devadason, Subramaniam, and Daniel (2010), they found that in general, tertiary-level students are either not aware of the importance of being equipped with interpersonal skills or are selective in their appreciation of these skills. The researchers also conjured that existing strategies need to be mended by Malaysian tertiary education institutions so that interpersonal skills will be successfully assimilated in the curriculum.

Theoretically speaking, teaching is a process of imparting skills, attitudes and values which in turn makes changes in students' behaviour (Ee, 1997 as cited in Tang, Ching and Siti Asiah Md Shahid, 2015). The teacher is a major factor in learning process management for organizing the content materials as well as activities to be congruent with the students' needs besides practising their thinking skills, management and application of knowledge in daily life. The teacher had to be the transformational leader responsible to explore the correct knowledge, comprehension, belief, and attitude toward students and teachers' learning process which was called the total changes of paradigm on students (Somprach, Popoonsak, Sombatteera, 2014). Teachers' competency development in interpersonal skills becomes the crucial factor to improve the teachers' competency in their profession into professionals (Crosbie, 2005). Interpersonal skills have in this regard been considered the core of teachers' professional responsibilities (Anand, 2013 as cited in Pasha, 2016). A good command on soft skills makes the teaching-learning process meaningful and effective (Pachauri & Yadav, 2014; Crosbie, 2005).

Hence, interpersonal skills development should be permeated into the professional training program as teaching is a complex activity requiring a wide range of knowledge and skills including hard and soft skills to successfully manage the demands of a classroom (Tang, Nor Hashimah & Hashimah, 2015, Cristian and Danisa, 2014). Since teaching is an additional complex process (Flores & Days, 2006, as cited in Tang, Hashimah Mohd Yunus and Nor Hashimah Hashim, 2015), novice teachers need to have important interpersonal skills. Despite that, the findings from research by Tang, Tan, and Uma Devi, (2015) uncovered that the development of interpersonal skills through the teacher education program is unsuccessful. The researchers also raised that trainee teachers often think highly of themselves. Their mindset in which they think that they are born with the interpersonal skills set which cannot be further developed led them to believe that they are well-qualified and are not lacking in any necessary skills. Nevertheless, the attainment of these skills will make a difference in the quality of teaching and effective learning (Tang, Nor Hashimah and Hashimah, 2015) which is a crucial factor in promoting effective learning in schools (Tang, 2011).

According to Göktalay and Özeke (2015), pre-service teachers need to be taught in an environment where students will be equipped with the 21st-century skills and competencies to help them develop their own teaching skills. Life and career skills are one essential component under the 21st-century skills. Social skills as part of these highlighted skills encompass flexibility & adaptability, initiative & self-direction, social & cross-cultural skills, productivity & accountability, as well as leadership & responsibility skills (Göktalay and Özeke, 2015). Pre-service teachers need to be assessed for the attainment of social skills before they join the working world as part of the workforce. The attainment of social skills will be able to highlight the pre-service teachers' competency in the working world (Airil Haimi Mohd Adnan, Sangeeth Ramalingam, Nurulhayati Ilias and Tahira Mt Tahir, 2014). Therefore, teacher training programs today are confronted with the issue of how best to ensure teaching graduates continue to be relevant and bring value to the job market. It is then the responsibility of the universities to ensure that teaching graduates have relevant skills to gain employment.

Meanwhile, English as a second language (ESL) teachers are also faced with a lot of challenges as the interaction between teachers and students (Kabilan, Ramdani, Mydin and Junaedi, 2020) in an ESL classroom is very crucial for the development and mastery of the second language by the students (Richards and Lockhart, 1996).

ESL teachers are often faced with many problems during their teaching practicum such as communication and relationship problems (Kabilan, Ramdani, Mydin and Junaedi, 2020; Faihanis Mohd Yusof and Haslina Halim, 2014; Fatiha Senom, Abd Razak Zakaria and Shanina Sharatol Ahmad Shah, 2013; Gan, 2013) besides classroom management and student handling problems (Wong, Indiatsi and Wong, 2016; Fatiha Senom, Abd Razak Zakaria and Shanina Sharatol Ahmad Shah, 2013).

Many studies were done under the lenses of; (1) the need for interpersonal skills to trainee teachers and novice teachers (Göktalay and Özeke, 2015; Tang, Nor Hashimah and Hashimah, 2015; Tang, 2011; Shakir, 2009) and (2) the problems and challenges faced by trainee teachers which also include ESL trainee teachers during their teaching practice (Wong, Indiatsi and Wong, 2016; Faihanis Mohd Yusof and Haslina Halim, 2014; Fatiha Senom, Abd Razak Zakaria and Shanina Sharatol Ahmad, 2013; Gan, 2013). There are no studies done specifically to observe the interpersonal skills of ESL trainee teachers nor are there any studies in the literature that look into the need for having interpersonal skills among ESL trainee teachers. However, a few studies highlighted that there is a need to teach interpersonal skills through ESL classes (Smriti Singh, 2019, Perumal and Usharani, 2017, Mousawa and Elyas, 2015 and Azwar Abbas, 2013). In order for ESL teachers to embed and teach interpersonal skills in their ESL classroom, they themselves need to be aware and knowledgeable of interpersonal skills.

Shakir (2009) suggested that the assessment of interpersonal skills is much more 'difficult' to be done as it involves less measurable elements and varies highly with each individual according to their character and background. This is also supported by Keratas, Sag, and Arslan (2015). The assessment of interpersonal skills is much more complicated to be done compared to the assessment of hard skills or technical skills. However, as posited by Tang et.al (2015), future researches need to focus on appropriate assessment method for assessing interpersonal skills, especially for trainee teachers. This is further supported by Fatiha Senom, Abd Razak Zakaria and Shanina Sharatol Ahmad (2013) who stated that the ESL teacher training programme needs to be revamped in order to provide optimal benefits to the teacher trainees in terms of developing the interpersonal skills required for the working world. This thus highlights the need to develop an assessment model to assess interpersonal skills among Malaysian undergraduates.

Overall, this research aims at developing an assessment model to assess the interpersonal skills development of Malaysian ESL trainee teachers. The need to develop the interpersonal skills assessment model will be identified and underlined. The development of interpersonal skills will be highlighted further as they are the crucial skills needed by Malaysian ESL trainee teachers.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

People skills are a core component of interpersonal skills (Cafasso, 1996; Klaus, 2010, as cited in Robbles, 2012) or attributes that characterize a person's relationships with others. Some researchers note that interpersonal skills are the most important skills at all levels of a job (Shakir, 2009; Smith, 2007 as cited in Robbles, 2012). Many authors will equate interpersonal skills with soft skills (James & James, 2004; Perreault, 2004, as cited in Robbles, 2012). Interpersonal skills include personal qualities and career attributes (James & James, 2004; Nieragden, 2000; Perreault, 2004 as cited in Robbles, 2012). Personal attributes might include one's personality, likeability, time management prowess, and organizational skills (Parsons, 2008 as cited in Robbles, 2012) whereas career attributes include communication, teamwork, leadership, and customer service (James & James, 2004 as cited in Robbles, 2012). People skills are the foundation of good customer service critical to professional success in almost any job (Evenson, 1999; Zehr, 1998 as cited in Robbles, 2012). People skills promote a positive attitude, effective communication, respectful interaction, and the ability to remain composed in difficult situations (Evenson, 1999, as cited in Robbles, 2012). Therefore, soft skills are made up of the combination of interpersonal (people) skills and personal (career) attributes. Besides that, soft skills are employability skills that are transferrable in many jobs. Cleary, Flynn, and Thomasson (2006) have defined general employability skills as follows:

- Basic/fundamental skills: technical, knowledge of the task, hands-on ability
- Conceptual/thinking skills: planning, collecting and organizing information, problem-solving
- Business skills: innovation and enterprise
- Community skills: civic and citizenship knowledge
- People-related skills: interpersonal qualities, such as communication and teamwork
- Personal skills: attributes such as being responsible, resourceful, and self-confident

According to Robles (2012), interpersonal skills have more to do with who we are than what we know. As such, interpersonal skills encompass the character traits that decide how well one interacts with others and are usually a definite part of one's personality. While hard skills can be learned and perfected over time, soft skills are more difficult to acquire and change. The hard and soft skills must complement one another.

Interpersonal Skills Need in the Working World

Shakir (2009) listed the interpersonal skills needed for the employability of graduates. The skills are leadership, teamwork, communication, and lifelong learning. Azwar Abbas (2013) and Tang, Nor Hashimah and Hasimah (2015) added to the list of interpersonal skills by listing critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills and ethics and professionalism. These skills are deemed as important skills needed to be possessed by graduates, especially future teachers in order to be more marketable in the future.

According to the National Graduate Employability Blueprint 2012-2017, Malaysian industries are focused on a specific skill set that graduates must possess when applying for a job. This skill set is divided into two categories comprising hard skills and soft skills. The paradigm shift in the 21st century has forced upon the importance of soft skills and it has become critical even in the technical industries. This confirms the sentiment that equipping graduates with soft skills can make a difference in obtaining and retaining a job that they had been hired for (Seetha, 2014). According to Seetha (2014), Malaysian employers are not satisfied with the skill set of the new workforce graduating from higher institutions of learning and are of the opinion that these graduates should be better equipped with soft skills in addition to hard skills.

Interpersonal Skills and Teaching Effectiveness in ESL Context

Teaching is a complex activity requiring a wide range of knowledge and skills including hard and soft skills to successfully manage the demands of the classroom (Tang, Hashimah Mohd Yunus & Nor Hashimah Hashim, 2015). Since teaching is an additional complex process (Flores & Days, 2006, as cited in Tang, Hashimah Mohd Yunus and Nor Hashimah Hashim, 2015), novice teachers need to have important interpersonal skills.

In second language teaching, a great deal of the teaching and learning process involves interaction among students and teachers and among the students themselves (Richards and Lockhart, 1996). Ellis (1985 as cited in Richards and Lockhart, 1996) believed that the interaction in the second language classroom has a considerable influence on learning. Teachers need to be able to manage their interactions with the class in a way that allows all students equal opportunities to participate (Richards and Lockhart, 1996). As argued by Hedge (2002), interaction pushes the students to produce more accurate and appropriate language, thus further developing their knowledge of the language.

According to Hattie (2003 as cited in Tang, Ching, and Siti Asiah Md Shahid, 2014), skilled and qualified teachers have a direct impact on influencing the interest and commitment of students as well as student achievement. Based on the above statement, the teacher plays a very important role in teaching and has a direct impact on students. Therefore, the relationship between the skills possessed by teachers and their quality of teaching is a very important and interesting topic to be investigated. A positive relationship between student and teacher has been shown to be important for student engagement and achievement (Roorda et al., 2011 as cited in van Uden, Ritzen, and Pieters, 2014). According to Muller (2001 as cited in van Uden, Ritzen, and Pieters, 2014), students who are trying to do their best are more likely to build a positive relationship with their teachers than students who do not show interest in school. In an ESL classroom, ESL teachers will be facing students with different abilities and backgrounds (Wong, Indiatsi and Wong, 2016). These ESL teachers need to be equipped with the necessary skills that will allow them to be more prepared in and outside of the classroom and according to Kabilan, Hussin, Zul-Qarna, Abdullah, Ismail and Khan (2017), interpersonal skills are one of the skills that ESL students need to attain to be such innovative and professional English language teachers.

Interpersonal skills have been proven to have a significant positive relationship with the teaching and learning process (Wei, Zhou, Barber & den Brok, 2015, Zainun Misbah, Gulikers, Ridwan Maulana & Mulder, 2015). Teachers and students who have the qualities of good communication, respect in a classroom, and interest shown in teaching from the point of view of the teacher and learning from a student will establish a positive relationship in the classroom (Duta, Panisoara, & Panisoara, 2015). The quality of teaching is a crucial factor in promoting effective learning in schools (Tang, 2013 in Tang, Hashimah Mohd Yunus & Nor Hashimah Hashim, 2015). Thus, this inevitably involves teachers' and students' interpersonal skills essential in promoting relationships and enhancing learning (Lim, Rodger & Brown, 2010; Tang, Hashimah Mohd Yunus & Nor Hashimah Hashim, 2015). Teacher social skills, as stressed by Tang, Hashimah Mohd Yunus and Nor Hashimah Hashim (2015) are important for teachers to enable them to deliver high-quality teaching and promote effective learning among the

students. The attainments of these social skills also contribute to the high employability rate among undergraduate students (Airil Haimi Mohd Adnan, Sangeeth Ramalingam, Nurulhayati Ilias and Tahirah Mt Tahir, 2014). However, the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) and Tang (2013 in Tang, Hashimah Mohd Yunus & Nor Hashimah Hashim, 2015) stated that employers report that graduates lack the necessary interpersonal skills in undergraduates upon graduation. Besides that, as stated by Tang and Tan (2015), from what was gathered from the school's administrators, although novice teachers are generally well-equipped with the content knowledge and are academically proficient, they lack interpersonal skills such as ethics, morals and professionalism, communication skills, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, teamwork skill and leadership skills. The critical lacking of these interpersonal skills was also reported by many people from the industry and it is adversely affecting the chances of graduates to secure a job (Airil Haimi, et.al, 2014 and Succi, 2015).

METHOD

The research design chosen for this study is qualitative research. Semi-structured interview was used as the method to collect data. This study is aimed at looking into the need of developing a model to assess soft skills among trainee teachers. It is also aimed at investigating the problems that are seen affecting professional development in trainee teachers who are lacking soft skills.

Sample

The participants chosen for this study are three (3) teachers and four (4) lecturers who teach English based on the following criteria set: they have all been involved in supervising ESL trainee teachers for teaching practice, they possessed an education background in Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) and they possessed more than 5 years teaching experience. The three (3) teachers have experience supervising and working with teacher trainees while the four (4) lecturers have experience in supervising ESL trainee teachers.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview was used in the interview process as it is more flexible. Prompting was done and the interview was guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored (Merriam, 2009) such as:

- (i) their own understanding of interpersonal skills
- (ii) the challenges faced by ESL trainee teachers and the interpersonal skills that the ESL trainee teachers lack during their teaching practice
- (iii) the effect of lacking interpersonal skills among trainee teachers
- (iv) the interpersonal skills that they deem as important for trainee teachers for their future career as teachers
- (v) how the teacher educational program can help in developing the trainee teachers' interpersonal skills
- (vi) their opinion on the need to develop an assessment model to assess interpersonal skills among ESL trainee teachers

The participants' responses are used to address the need of having to develop soft skill assessment models. The interview protocol and questions were validated by two experts. One of them is an Assistant Professor while the other one is the Head of Department for Journalism Department. Both of them are attached to a private tertiary education institution.

DATA ANALYSIS

The findings gathered from the responses were analysed through thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-phase framework. Figure 1 below explains the framework. With reference to the framework, the data collected from the interview was transcribed and tabulated, initially in accordance with the initial code. The initial codes generated from the data were then clustered to form themes. The themes that emerged were classified according to the number of occurrences; the more it occurs, the more significant it is. After that, the themes were reviewed and classification was done once again in order to ensure that the themes were representative of the emergent themes. In the fifth stage (Define themes), the emerging themes were further identified and each theme finalised accordingly based on the data collected.

Figure 1: Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULT AND FINDINGS

The findings will be presented according to the emergent themes. After rounds of revisions, the data were categorised into 4 major themes which are; (1) challenges faced by ESL trainee teachers (2) interpersonal skills for ESL trainee teachers (3) the role of educational institutions in developing and enhancing interpersonal skills among ESL trainee teachers and (4) the need to develop an assessment model to assess interpersonal skills among ESL teacher trainees.

Theme 1: Challenges Faced by ESL Trainee Teachers

Based on the data, the respondents highlighted that ESL trainee teachers faced some new challenges during their teaching practice. When they are in the classroom, the trainees were found to have some difficulty dealing with students and the new environment. In addition, these trainees also face challenges with, not only other fellow teachers but also with themselves that involved their own self-perception and motivation.

During the teaching and learning process, the trainee teachers were reported to face challenges in evoking the students' interest in learning. This, according to the data, will make them feel challenged in the classroom. When this happens, it can disrupt the conducive learning environment in the classroom.

Besides that, these trainee teachers were also reported to have problems in managing time well in their classes hence making them feel demotivated when they were unable to finish their lessons. Other than that, they also faced challenges to create interesting lesson plans for their lessons. They were not resourceful and were not able to think out of the box. This can be inferred from the excerpts below.

"First of all, they are having difficulties in getting the students to be interested in learning the language. Majority of them are getting schools whereby the students have no interest or are not bothered about English. This has affected in their capability in carrying out their responsibility as an English teacher. They will be challenged (directly or indirectly) in carrying out the lesson, asking the students to complete work or homework and getting the students to participate in the class activity."

Respondent 1

"Time management. Most ESL trainee teachers are unable to complete their lessons on time due (to) poor time management. When this happens, they are demotivated and will take time for them to recover. The problem is, they do not have a lot of time to spare. Everything is moving fast during teaching practice, so they cannot just dwell in their sadness. They need to be able to also manage their emotion." Respondent 3

Other than that, ESL trainee teachers also faced challenges in adapting to the new environment. The transition from being a student to a teacher might be too overwhelming for the students hence causing them to have problems adopting to the real school environment. This is especially true when the students have never had any real school teaching experience before, such as handling students during their university-school programmes. They also faced challenges in building relationships with other teachers. They may not be aware of the social protocols in the schools and may step out of the line. The excerpts below show the respondents' responses with regard to this matter.

"The trainee teachers have problem with coping with the school surrounding and environment. It is real to them..it is a real school with real students and they are NOT the students...they are the teacher...and for them to realize that..it is not easy...I understand..hmm..I faced it before. It took some time for them to adapt. It's not that we expect them to adapt immediately, but taking their own time adapting...that is not good for them. They lost valuable time which they can use to gain knowledge and guidance from other teachers." Respondent 4

"The students that came for teaching practicum in my school...hmm..they have problem communicating with other teachers..older and senior teachers. They do not know to react and respond. I pity them, but..once you are in school, as the TEACHER, you are an adult and you need to learn to interact with EVERYONE in the school. Some of them only want to talk with their teacher mentors. They do not really want to mix around with other teachers. They need to know that in a school, teachers are one unit...we work together..especially in conducting events. These students, they think that only their English teacher mentor can help and guide them...no..that is wrong..they can get other teachers' guidance and opinion as well." Respondent 5

Furthermore, the ESL trainee teachers also faced challenges due to their own perceptions and thinking. According to the data, ESL trainee teachers often have no motivation or feel demotivated. They easily lose their motivation in facing criticism and feedback. Besides that, when something did not go as planned, it affected their motivation. Furthermore, they felt inferior due to the age gap between the other teachers and them. In addition, they also did not do any reflection on their teaching and their learning. The response from the respondents below illustrates the situation.

"Lack of motivation to put in the extra effort in making the lessons more student-centred, most of them would only resort to worksheets and exercises in the textbook. When us, the supervising lecturers give them feedback, they cannot take it. It's like their whole life is falling apart. They become demotivated. I get to know this from my other TP (Teaching Practice) supervisees...usually I have 2 or 3 TP supervisees, so they told me about their friends, hoping that I can somehow 'console' their friend. Hmm...not good. Apart from that, some of them fail to evaluate themselves and reflect on the teaching and learning activities they have carried out in the class. Their teaching reflection and their weekly journal reflection were not too 'reflective'. They are very superficial. They are writing it for the sake of writing." Respondent 2

"The age gap between the trainees with the other teachers... I realised it makes them to be in inferiority situation hence, lead to less interaction with the other teachers. They only like to mingle and talk to their teacher mentor." Respondent 7

Hence, based on the responses from the respondents, ESL trainee teachers faced problems with their surroundings, the other teachers and also themselves. These future teachers who will be teaching English need to learn to overcome the problems and difficulties. When they overcome the problems and challenges, they can optimally benefit from their teaching practice experience and be more ready to face the world as English teachers.

Theme 2: Interpersonal Skills for Trainee Teachers

From the data collected, all of the respondents agreed that the main skill that is related to interpersonal skills is communication skills. They concluded that communication skills in this sense involve communication and interaction with students, school administrators, other teachers and also other stakeholders such as parents. It can be seen in the excerpts of the interview below.

“When I hear the word interpersonal skill, the first thing that pops in my mind is communication with other people; how we talk, interact with other people, you know...verbal or non-verbal languages, that is interpersonal skill”. Respondent 1

“Interpersonal skill...as I know, is how we interact with our surrounding...also including people...in different situation. What I mean by different situation is when we are with our family, we interact differently compared to when we are with our friends. We must to know how to interact when we are in different situation...family different....friend different.....boss different”. Respondent 4

One of the respondents, interestingly added conflict management, having social awareness and self-awareness as the skills under interpersonal skills. Quoting Respondent 2,

“Interpersonal skills to me is all about dealing with people around oneself. It is a relationship skill to work with people in a team, communicating within the group effectively as well as managing conflicts when working with people. Someone who has good interpersonal skills is likely to maintain a professional and healthy relationship with the people they work with and it requires good social awareness, showing understanding and empathy for others they are working in teams. Apart from that, self-awareness is also very important. Sometimes we learn the most when we reflect on our own self, like the effects of the words we have spoken and actions we have taken.”

To add on, the other interpersonal skills that are deemed important for ESL trainee teachers which are mentioned according to their significance are decision-making, problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, relationship skills, leadership, emotional intelligence, leadership, self-awareness and assertiveness as well as accepting criticism and feedback. These are the skills that ESL trainee teachers need to be equipped with before stepping into the real teaching world where they are accountable for everything that they do.

Referring to the data, decision-making, problem solving and conflict-resolution skills were mentioned quite frequently compared to the others. When prompted further, the respondents who stressed the need for ESL trainee teachers to be equipped with these skills relate the need to the incidents that they had to face when dealing with ESL trainee teachers. The excerpts below will highlight the importance of these skills.

“They need emotional intelligence, conflict management and resolution and problem solving and decision making. Most of the (ESL) trainee teachers I have supervised, do not have these skills. They let their emotion affects them...like if they have problem with..hmm..their parents,...they cannot function (teach) well in school the next day...or when their teacher mentor give feedback.. they cannot take it positively. They will be like... “Miss, my teacher mentor just wants to find fault only.” It’s like they think they are too smart which honestly..hmm...the better word to use is irritate me so much. And this kids..they just don’t know how to make decision and solve problems in class. Sometimes they need me..they need me to make decision and solve their problem. I don’t know why, but I was never like that before when I did my TP (teaching practice). It’s like they want my approval before doing anything regarding THEIR OWN CLASS”. Respondent 1

“The trainee teachers need to have good problem-solving skills. They need to be able to solve their own problems in class and not depend too much on teacher mentors. Sometimes, we become a little bit bias towards them...because, they are teaching our class, our students, we know our class and we know our students, so, when they tell us about this problem and that problem, we somehow have this perception that they are incompetent. They cannot solve problem; THEIR OWN PROBLEM and they cannot decide what is best during that time. So, it’s not good. First few times..OK, we understand, they are adapting, but when they come to us too often, it doesn’t give good vibe.” Respondent 5

To conclude this section, the respondents have highlighted the interpersonal skills that are important to ESL trainee teachers. These skills are crucial in their pursuit of becoming an English teacher. Thus, ESL trainee teachers need to be equipped with interpersonal skills before stepping into the real world as teachers.

Theme 3: The role of teacher training programmes (TTPs) with regard to interpersonal skills for ESL trainee teachers

The data conjured that the role of teacher training programmes in order to develop and enhance ESL trainee teachers’ interpersonal skills is very crucial. The respondents highlighted that TTPs need to expose the students

more to hands-on programmes which involve the students mingling and creating activities with small groups of school students. Other than that, training on interpersonal skills can be done with other institutions or external training parties. This can expose the students to a new and fun environment for learning to take place. This can also help them to build more confidence and appropriate skills to deal with real school students and mingle with other people.

Other than that, it was also highlighted that the teaching courses and the education programme themselves need to be embedded with interpersonal skills. The students need to be exposed to the importance and the need to possess interpersonal skills and to know how these skills are relevant and useful to them when they become English teachers in the future. This can be demonstrated through the responses below.

“Teacher education programme gives hands-on which involve participating rather than contemplating at the theory. I believe practical is better than theory. What they have learned in the classrooms (courses offered at university) will be implemented in their assigned classroom at the school. They will face the “real” students. This can build confidence and make them to be ready to learn.” Respondent 7

“Teaching courses should embed interpersonal skills that will prepare them for their future career.” Respondent 3

“The content of the programme normally will help the trainee teachers to develop their interpersonal skills. Mastering the skills like communication..and..hmm.. positive motivation and many more require a good and well-planned guideline. So, it’s important for an institution to develop good programme for a trainee teacher.” Respondent 6

The data analysed support the notion that the teacher training programmes have a vital role in developing, enhancing and equipping ESL trainee teachers with the necessary interpersonal skills needed for their professional development. If the students are well-equipped with the skills needed, especially interpersonal skills, it will make them become better teachers in the future.

Theme 4: The need to develop an assessment model to assess interpersonal skills among ESL teacher trainees. For the final theme, all the respondents agreed that there is a need to develop an assessment model to assess Interpersonal Skills for ESL trainee teachers. According to the responses gathered, all of the respondents concur that an assessment model is needed to assess interpersonal skills as it can help teacher training programmes to identify what is lacking among its students and how to counter the problems. Besides that, they all agree that the assessment model can help in developing interpersonal skills and better prepare the students to be ESL trainee teachers and qualified future English teachers. It can also help with the trainee teacher’s readiness to teach students in the real classroom and further boost their confidence. The excerpts below stressed the need of having an Interpersonal Skills assessment model for ESL trainee teachers.

“Having a model that assesses the interpersonal skills of ESL teacher trainees would allow the teacher to effectively gauge how ready the teacher trainees are before they are sent to school. This would help produce teacher trainees who are well prepared for the actual teaching environment in school...that hmm..minimizing the difficulties and challenges mentioned above.” Respondent 2

“Having a model could assist the students in identifying whether are they lacking in these skills (interpersonal skills) and to help them to develop these skills (interpersonal skills)”. Respondent 2

“The most important aspect is to prepare the trainee to the real world. Interpersonal skills are important as it is the key factor to a good relationship among administration, colleague and the client (school students).” Respondent 6

Grounded on the responses presented above, it is appropriate to say that there is a need for the development of an assessment model to assess the interpersonal skills of ESL trainee teachers. The assessment model serves as a gate to ensure that the trainee teachers are well-equipped with the necessary interpersonal skills. The equipment of the skills can ensure that teacher training programs are producing a quality workforce to the education system.

DISCUSSION

The first research objective is aimed at identifying the challenges faced by teacher trainees with regard to their interpersonal skills. According to the data gathered, ESL teacher trainees faced difficulties in the aspect of communication and interaction with other teachers as well as students. They faced problems in managing their time in the classroom, making decisions, and in regulating their emotions. They also faced challenges in motivating their students in class. These findings concurred with the claims made by Kabilan, Ramdani, Mydin and Junaedi, (2020); Faihanis and Haslina, (2014); Fatiha, Abd Razak and Shanina Sharatol, (2013); Gan, (2013), Richards & Lockhart (1996) and Ellis (1985 as cited in Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

Besides that, the students also faced challenges in evoking their own students' interests and motivation to learn. This is in confirmation with the statement made by Hattie (2003 as cited in Tang, Ching and Siti Asiah Md Shahid, 2014) where teachers' skill and quality have a direct effect in making students more interested and committed to learning. Furthermore, these ESL trainee teachers need to be equipped with interpersonal skills such as communication skills, decision-making, problem-solving and conflict resolution skills, relationship skills, leadership, emotional intelligence, leadership, self-awareness and assertiveness and accepting criticism and feedback. The skills listed correspond with the interpersonal skills listed by James & James, 2004 as cited in Robbles, 2012, Shakir (2009), Azwar Abbas, 2013 and Tang, Nor Hashimah and Hashimah, (2015). These researchers agreed that the skills are important for graduates, especially trainee teachers to attain in order to be more marketable and better workforce in the industry.

It was also highlighted in the findings that teacher training programmes need to play an active role in equipping future teachers with the necessary interpersonal skills. This can be done through embedding interpersonal skills teaching in the teaching courses and the educational programmes themselves. This, however, does not correspond with the research by Tang, Tan, Uma Devi, (2015). In their study, they concluded that the development of interpersonal skills through the teacher education program is unsuccessful. The reasons behind the unsuccessfulness according to Tang, Tan, Uma Devi, (2015) are big class sizes, more emphasis is given to academics and the gap between the acquired and the required interpersonal skills.

The second objective has also been achieved. Based on the data derived from the interview, the respondents agreed that there is a need to develop an assessment model to assess the interpersonal skills of teacher trainees. The teachers stated that the assessment model can better prepare the teacher trainees in order to have high-quality education teaching and learning nowadays. This concurs to the statement made by Tang, Hashimah & Nor Hashimah, (2015) that there is a need to develop an assessment model to assess interpersonal skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In a nutshell, the findings accentuate the need to develop an assessment model to assess interpersonal skills among ESL trainee teachers. The challenges faced by trainee teachers in their teaching practice such as communication problems and poor decision making need to be addressed as they can negatively affect the trainee teachers' future careers as teachers. Trainee teachers also need to be equipped with interpersonal skills such as communication skills, decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, assertiveness, time management skills and leadership skills. The attainment of these skills by the trainee teachers will ensure a smooth sailing career in them as teachers in the future.

Last but not least, future researchers can look into developing a module to assess interpersonal skills. A detailed assessment plan is indeed needed to assess and evaluate interpersonal skills attainment among ESL trainee teachers. This can further improve the curriculum development of higher educational institutions' curriculum design besides the teaching and learning process.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

The lead author* affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been explained.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no self-interest in the study conducted.

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