



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Awareness of the Learning Crisis among Trainee Teachers in Malaysia

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Dec19, 2024	<p>The learning crises in Malaysia have gained substantial attention over the decades, especially with international formal assessments like PISA indicating that the nation's literacy and numeracy levels have been declining. A persistent number of school dropouts and socio-economic disparity among Malaysian students, resulting in unequal learning opportunities, have exacerbated the crisis. When the reduced number of experienced teachers in the Malaysian teaching force finds the task of curbing the learning crisis daunting, the trainee teachers at schools just getting acquainted with the Malaysian education system in authentic situations would find handling the learning crisis a Herculean mission. This qualitative research gauged the awareness of the learning crisis in Malaysia among twenty-nine ESL trainee teachers placed in primary and secondary schools in rural and suburban areas in Perak and Selangor states in Malaysia. The trainee teachers, recruited via the referral method, showed that they did not have an in-depth understanding of the learning crisis and their comprehension of the issue was restricted to classroom settings. Learners became the root of the crisis, and other significant issues like society, curriculum, and educational policies were hardly discussed in identifying the causes, symptoms, and solutions for the learning crisis. The lack of comprehension among these trainee teachers calls for attention to revising the teacher education curriculum to become more relatable to real-world educational issues that deliver holistic teachers in the future who could critically analyse any educational issues from multiple perspectives to find solutions.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to improve the quality of global human life, including providing quality education (SDG 4) that quotes "to ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and promote learning opportunities that are lifelong and accessible to all." The Malaysian government has adopted this notion (Jeffrey Sachs Center (Sunway University), 2022). Ensuring quality education for all Malaysians, regardless of gender, race, religion, or background, is one of the significant aims within the primary targets set by the Malaysian government to achieve SDG 4 by the year 2030. However, Malaysia has faced challenges in delivering quality education, resulting in a national learning crisis (Malaysian Education System Faces Crisis, 2023).

Despite increasing budget allocations for education, general educational achievement among Malaysian students has shown a steady decline over the years, and students have not been meeting the objectives of the planned curricula (Tiong, 2024). Their attainment of basic literacy and numeracy skills is alarmingly below the curricula-prescribed standards, especially given that the Malaysian

government has introduced many policies and schemes to help students obtain a well-rounded education (Haridas, 2024). One of the major stakeholders in addressing the learning crisis is the teaching force in Malaysia, and research has shown that Malaysian teachers are aware of the challenges they face in schools (Chuah & Mohamad, 2020; Ishak et al., 2022; Junaidi et al., 2022). However, reports commonly indicate that veteran teachers were the ones to share their opinions on the learning crisis; they have struggled with this dilemma for decades before recognising the escalating problems in schools. The crux of the matter is to gauge the awareness of the learning crisis among young teaching staff, especially the trainee teachers, who will constitute the majority of the teaching force in Malaysia in the next 10 years.

Unlike the older generation of teachers who have had time to confront the learning crisis over the past decades, young teachers, like the teacher trainees who have just stepped into the profession, find time a luxury that eludes them. Trainee teachers must keep pace with the advent of technology and the evolving educational landscape while quickly adapting to a new environment. Addressing learning crises will be overwhelming without prior knowledge. Thus, this paper investigates teacher trainees' awareness of the learning crisis, narrowing the field to English language teaching and learning among ESL teacher trainees in Malaysia.

Background

Learning Crisis in the Malaysian Education System

Despite increasing budget allocations for education by the ruling government, the number of Malaysian children failing to reach fundamental reading and numerical competence steadily increases, indicating a paradoxical relationship between the two components. Malaysian schools have been facing problems such as students' disinterest in learning, increased school dropouts, and a lack of access to education due to domestic financial issues in students' families (Rajantharan et al., 2022). The negligence towards education in Malaysia can be observed from many local instances within the education sector, such as absenteeism for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Certificate of Education) in 2022, which was 2.7%, significantly higher than the previous year. An estimated 40,000 students drop out of school in Malaysia yearly (Anuar, 2023).

The 2022 evaluation of The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), catering to delivering current achievements about a country's learning outcomes, indicated a notable decline in Malaysian students' literacy and numeracy skills among the 15-year-olds compared to the previous years; the rank of the country slipped further down compared to the other neighbouring countries, and the PISA report commented on the nation's less successful education system in preparing the students for the real world (OECD, 2022; Rajaendram, 2023). These instances spell a national learning crisis, with an urgent call to be alert of the dire circumstances among the stakeholders and immediately address the issues.

Apart from the aforementioned problems, the COVID-19 pandemic became a major catalyst in inducing learning loss among Malaysian children, exacerbating the learning crisis within the nation (Amini et al., 2024). When the country was locked down to cope with the epidemic, Malaysian children had to navigate a substantial educational shift as their familiar physical classrooms transitioned to entirely unconventional virtual platforms (Muniandy et al., 2022). Not every child had sufficient resources to access online classes, so many could not follow the lessons, resulting in learning loss and a learning crisis within the nation.

Socio-economic disparity, which has been adduced as the reason for unequal education in Malaysia between children from poor and affluent families, played a more ferocious role during the outbreak when students from low-income families and rural areas had to forgo online education, citing lack of equipment and non-existent access to the Internet as reasons. Even children with access to online learning suffered due to their inability to engage in virtual learning and the teachers' limited experience in conducting remote classes (Muniandy, Kandasamy et al., 2022; Wong, 2021).

Teacher quality is another prevalent factor contributing to the learning crisis in Malaysia, where teachers have been reported to lack sufficient training to meet the nation's teaching standards (Nation, 2024; Rahman & Ikhlas, 2022). Teacher recruitment criteria have also raised concerns, particularly regarding the teachers' credentials to teach the children. When COVID-19 propelled many senior teachers to seek early retirement due to their inability to cope with the new demands of remote teaching, it caused a large turnover of employees in the Malaysian education system, resulting in a critical shortage of the teaching force.

Many new teachers were employed to fill the void, even though they lacked the preparedness to handle the high requirements of the rapidly evolving Malaysian education system (Hassan, 2024). Experienced Malaysian teachers, on the other hand, have been reported to be falling behind in their profession due to burnout caused by high workloads and expanded teaching requisites in the face of expeditious curriculum and policy changes in Malaysian education (Mat Zin et al., 2023). These issues have impacted teacher quality in Malaysia, leading to a national learning crisis.

Furthermore, the rigidity of the Malaysian curriculum, with its overemphasis on examinations and reduced focus on real-world preparation, has been cited as another reason for the learning crisis (Jasmi, 2023). This has become a bone of contention among academics and the public within the nation, with no significant improvements made to the national primary and secondary curriculum. An excessive focus on written examinations that centre around retrieving memorised information neglects other aspects of evaluation, such as vocational skills, artistic abilities, and athletic prowess.

Hence, students with limited abilities in rote learning cannot demonstrate their strengths in other fields, as the Malaysian curriculum scarcely provides a platform to showcase their talents (Fong, 2024). This problem leads to a failure to provide Malaysian students with a holistic education. It burdens those whose abilities are more inclined toward non-academic ventures, who are often criticised as unsuccessful students, pushing them towards emotional and mental issues. Eventually, these students experience burnout and give up on succeeding in the conventional education imposed on them, causing a learning crisis.

Teacher Education in Malaysia

Malaysian trainee teachers spend three to four years undergoing a rigorous teaching curriculum, preparing themselves at universities to undertake teaching responsibilities in primary or secondary schools. They are placed in schools for about four to six months to familiarise themselves with the school environment before being appointed full-fledged teachers. Nevertheless, the trainee teacher curriculum and training have raised constant questions, particularly about their readiness to teach in schools, as the teacher trainees often complain about their lack of knowledge of recent trends in the Malaysian education system (Adams & Tan, 2022). Additionally, the trainees have been noted for their strong comprehension of the assigned teaching subjects. However, they fail to transfer the theoretical input into practice and are not ready to deal with authentic teaching and learning issues in schools (Karpanan & Kaur, 2023). Trainee teachers from non-science backgrounds (language, arts, sports, etc.) are reportedly less prepared to teach than their science counterparts (Ibrahim et al., 2019).

Research Objective and Significance

Thus, this paper investigated the awareness of Malaysian ESL trainee teachers regarding the national learning crisis, which is imperative for their performance during their teaching practice phase and their subsequent teaching profession. Besides contributing to the existing literature on Malaysian teacher education, the results of this investigation could play a prominent role in improving the national teacher education curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research involved twenty-nine trainee teachers who majored in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to Malaysian primary and secondary students. ESL trainees were targeted for this research as past literature reported that non-science trainee teachers had an increased

degree of unpreparedness in teaching at schools compared to those from a science background. The trainees, who were undergraduates of English Education programmes in Malaysian public and private universities, served their teaching practice at Malaysian public national schools for at least eight weeks at the data collection point. For this research, fifteen trainee teachers from primary schools and fourteen from secondary schools around rural and sub-urban areas in Perak and Selangor in Malaysia were recruited; they were teaching English to different standards and forms at schools.

Referral sampling was employed to recruit trainee teachers for this study, as the teachers need to participate in the research voluntarily and share their honest opinions about the questions posed (Pretorius, 2024). Each trainee teacher recruited was interviewed one-on-one and face-to-face using semi-structured interview questions. The interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed to identify their awareness of the learning crisis in Malaysia.

FINDINGS

Twenty-nine Malaysian ESL trainee teachers (fifteen from primary and fourteen from secondary schools) were interviewed to gauge their awareness of the learning crisis in Malaysia, which is divided into four components: awareness of the presence of the learning crisis, identification of the causes, symptoms, impacts, and solutions.

1) Awareness of the presence of the learning crisis

The interviews with the ESL trainee teachers revealed that they were aware of the learning crisis in Malaysian schools. Still, their awareness was only partial since they were curbed to classroom problems, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1

A:	"I know the students have problems...I mean...not everyone is perfect. The weak students hardly can read. It is a crisis there. Writing is a big challenge. They don't really pay attention. So, they never improve."
B:	"...don't follow the class. They don't understand what's happening in the class. Imaging having students...like in Form 4 or 5 and still cannot read a word in English. I understand weaker students are there, but they are very weak. I think that's a major crisis."
C;	"Not to say I'm blaming them...but I was wondering how they cannot be at least reading English. Why? Well, crisis. They can read if they follow the lessons since young. They can't write perfect sentences...I'm fine. But can't read at all, and not because they have physical problems. They do read Malay...not English."

Each excerpt in Table 1 indicates trainee teachers' awareness of the learning crisis in Malaysia. However, their surprise at the degree of the crisis, which was worse than they expected, shows their lack of depth in understanding the crisis. Besides, the crisis they mentioned during the interviews revolved around the students' inability to read English words, or English literacy, rather than other issues.

2) Identifying the Causes of the Learning Crisis

Based on the interviews, the trainee teachers stated that the main reason for the learning crisis was the students' reluctance to learn and their lack of motivation to study English. Table 2 highlights the trainee teachers' responses regarding the causes of the learning crisis in Malaysia.

Table 2

A: "They don't want to really learn English. Always run around or chit chat with friends during class. The good ones are good. The weak ones, no motivation. That's why they cannot learn."
B: "...yes yes, they only learn subjects they want. English is not something they like. So, they don't really focus in class. I think motivation is not much there."
C; "I will say they're simply not interested. So, they remain weak. They're not motivated to learn or get better. So, I think learning crisis will be there if they don't change."

These trainee teachers constantly cited the students' attitudes towards the subject, English, as the main reason for their failure to grasp the language well, without any reference to other factors such as the students' socio-economic background, their exposure to the language since childhood, or the school infrastructure that allows students access to the language.

3) Recognising the Symptoms of a Learning Crisis

Table 3 shows the results of the interviews with the trainee teachers about their ability to recognise the symptoms of a learning crisis.

Table 3

A: "It is quite obvious, right? You have a 16-year-old can't read a word in English. And he will be sitting for his exam next year. Hmm...that's an alert."
B: "...I've students cannot spell monosyllable words. Even when we show pictures, they cannot say the words in English. Not reading is a big symptom."
C; "Not reading, not writing even when they should be able to do it. They're not pre-schoolers but they hardly know their phonics. We can say that shows learning crisis."

The typical pattern of identifying illiteracy as equivalent to a learning crisis was emergent in the interviews with the trainee teachers. Their views on the problem only entailed the students' inability to read or write at their level, and the failure was credited to the students' lack of effort in improving their English language. Again, the classroom environment became the benchmark for these trainees in measuring the learning crisis without considering macro issues like economic disparity or digital divide within Malaysia.

4) Ascertaining the impacts of the learning crisis

Table 4 contains the replies from the trainee teachers when they were questioned about the possible impacts of the learning crisis in Malaysia.

Table 4

A: "They don't improve now. In future, they may not improve. English is important. So, without improvement, cannot foresee them having many job opportunities."
B: "...it is a crisis. Definitely bad impact. Not sure if they can pass their exams and get results to land good jobs in future."
C;

"I'll say they face problem finding jobs. At least they should learn to communicate to function in society in future. Now okay...still at school. In society they should know how to use the language."

Again, the trainee teachers commented on the impacts of the learning crisis in Malaysia with close reference to their current students' lack of literacy in the English language. Their worries were about their students passing the examinations and completing their studies with sufficient results to be employed in the future. Any concerns about communities, the economy, or educational policies at present or in the future were hardly mentioned.

5) Deciding solutions for the learning crisis

Table 5 summarises the replies from the trainee teachers about their possible solutions for the learning crisis in Malaysia.

Table 5

A: "Students need to want to learn. Then only change can happen. We can teach all we want but nothing changes if they don't want to change."
B: "All crises can be solved. This can too. We promote English language to them. Show them the importance of learning. Not only language teachers...everyone around them can tell them how it is important. If we repeat the statements, I'm sure they will get it eventually."
C; "Collaborative effort I should say. Can't change in the near future but if we put enough effort to show them, then they will change for the better. Crisis will be solved too...but need to be patient."

The trainee teachers' replies showcase how they were too focused on the students to suggest that the learning crisis would be resolved if they were alerted to the importance of learning the English language. The interviews never mentioned the national education policy, the curriculum, or the teaching methods.

DISCUSSION

Evidently, the trainee teachers involved in this research collectively thought of the learning crisis in Malaysia as solely related to literacy issues. Any problems they observed during their teaching practice were linked to the students' learning attitudes and motivations, sans other larger issues. Besides, the trainee teachers were too focused on the learners and did not consider the curriculum, methods of assessment, or teaching techniques as issues related to the learning crisis. They were significantly surprised to identify older students failing even to recognise simple English words, and that issue became the trainee teachers' representation of the learning crisis within the nation. Even when asked about solutions for the learning crisis, the trainee teachers' answers revolved around the students and never ventured further than boosting the students' morale to learn the language.

The trainee teachers' replies regarding the national learning crisis also infer their lack of exposure to the crisis in their teacher education. If discussions held during their university days were linked to real-world education problems, the trainee teachers would have been aware of the scale of the learning crisis, which extends beyond the walls of classrooms and the learners. Thus, a lacuna in the teacher education curriculum needs to be addressed to ensure the production of holistic teachers who analytically scrutinise educational issues by considering all possible perspectives for a problem rather than conveniently choosing to point to students' or teachers' weaknesses.

Besides, without an in-depth awareness of the learning crisis, it would be impossible for these ESL trainee teachers to adopt and adapt teaching strategies suitable for their students, who may be weaker or more advanced than the planned national language curriculum. They need to acknowledge that the challenges in teaching and learning do not only stem from weak students; the problems are

deeply rooted in many societal and economic issues pervading Malaysian communities, manifesting as a learning crisis on a grand scale within the nation. Only with this acknowledgement can these trainee teachers upskill themselves as a teaching force striving to provide equitable, resilient, and innovative education for the coming generations.

CONCLUSION

This investigation highlighted the incomplete understanding of the learning crisis in Malaysia among the ESL trainee teachers, which may not seem like an issue as they were still undergoing their training; however, without any amendment to their preconceived notions about the learning crisis, these trainee teachers would become full-fledged teachers without their notions corrected, which will have complicated implications for their profession in the future. Thus, the Malaysian teacher education curriculum should be revised to emphasise real-world educational problems to train these future teachers not only in teaching their subjects but also in handling education-related problems at the internal (within schools) and national (the Education Ministry) levels to meet the planned SDG4 targets by the year 2030.

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