

Editorial Note



<https://doi.org/10.52696/PDWN3253>

Editors
Thematic Anniversary Issue of *the English Teacher*

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Liberating the Minds and Actions of English Language Teachers

In 2021, *The English Teacher*, one of the two journals published by the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association (MELTA), commemorates its 50th year of publication, making it the oldest continuously published journal in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Malaysia. *The English Teacher* promotes research and reflections on English language teaching and learning practices, and policies at all levels of education. This aim continues to underlie the spirit of the journal and echoes the words of the late Tun Hamdan Sheikh Tahir upon launching *The English Teacher* in 1971:

“All information gained, whether by researchers or classroom teachers should be pooled and disseminated as widely as possible so that all involved in the teaching of this subject will benefit. Hence the birth of *The English Teacher* is most opportune.” (cited by Nair, 2016, p. 62)

The sustainability of *The English Teacher* over the last fifty years is largely due to the commitment of the various Chief Editors and their editorial teams, the advisory board and reviewers. To publish issue after issue, year after year is no mean feat, and this would not have been possible without the support from MELTA’s leadership who also provided technical and administrative assistance for the journal.

To celebrate the journal’s golden anniversary, we feature eight papers on the theme of teacher agency at various levels of education. This theme was selected because there is often a sense

of disconnect between policy and practice, and a sense of disempowerment among educators about what they want to do for their learners, and what they are ‘allowed’ to do. Priestly, Biesta and Robinson (2013) expound on the idea that teacher agency concerns both the personal and professional experience of the teacher and, according to them, the achievement of agency has always been informed by past experience and is often orientated towards the future in achieving certain goals and values. They further explicate that teacher agency is always enacted in a concrete situation which may constrain and support the structural, cultural and resources made available to the teachers.

In fact, our existence in this world can be marked through our ability to make choices and decisions in our lives which can be achieved through the types of education that we receive. Nelson Mandela once said that education is the most powerful weapon which can be used to change the world. Educators, therefore, play an integral role not only in the dissemination of knowledge but also as actions that change students’ present and future lives.

English language educators at all levels have many demands thrust upon them. They are deemed to be models of ‘good’ English, and as people responsible for ensuring that students achieve the desired levels of proficiency and communication skills. At the same time they are expected to be innovative and creative, with the agility to learn and adapt to new teaching, learning and assessment methods. Over the last one year, this has meant having to switch to online methods literally overnight due the closure of schools and institutions of higher education due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic also highlighted the need for educators to have empathy and compassion for students’ plights, difficulties and challenges. In the case of English language educators, this is not just in relation to students having to learn it as a second or foreign language, but is also related to other challenges, for example, the status of English and its varieties, attitudes and perceptions towards learning and using English, in addition to changing language and language education policies. However, despite top down policies and instructions, and standardised curricula and assessment, there is still room for self-awareness as educators constantly and critically reflect on their decisions and actions, and think about how these practices can impact their students’ lives.

With reference to ELT, liberating the mind and actions of English language teachers is the essence of transforming language learning and education. As part of professional growth, reflections of their practices can liberate them, grounding them into the realities of the teaching and learning contexts and emancipating them from feeling disempowered and helpless to solve problems creatively. Such decisions and actions can be rewarding for teachers in terms of self-fulfillment and professional development.

As previously mentioned, this thematic anniversary issue of *The English Teacher*, features eight articles. We begin the issue with Setiano Sugiharto’s article, *Teachers Agency as the Technology of Self and as Actionality: Implications for ELT Micro-centric Policy Making*, which critically examines the notion of teacher agency in light of two conceptual frameworks: technologies of the self and transitionalist-actionistic, or conduct pragmatism. The author posits the idea of how teachers’ role can be crucial in creating a micro-centric policy of teaching and learning English which is enacted by individual teachers through their classroom setting.

The second article by Kristof Savski discusses the prominence given to the Common European Language Reference (CEFR) in the *English Language Education Reform in Malaysia: The Roadmap 2015-2025* and how such a document has an impact on the local agency in the Malaysian context. This article is positioned within the framework of language policy and examines the role of CEFR in the global and Malaysian context. It provides alternatives for using CEFR within a localised model which is socio-culturally mindful of the diversity and multilingualism of the Malaysian teachers and learners.

The next article details out the conceptual configurations of teacher agency by drawing on the teacher agentive acts in the process of collaborative expertise building. Here, Ruanni Tupas in *Teacher Agency Through Collaborative Expertise-building* focuses on selected tertiary education in South East Asia, and discusses how teacher agency is conceptualised as an *accomplishment* of acts of producing knowledge for teacher's professional practice.

In *Every Teacher a Changemaker: Reflections on Teacher Agency and Empowerment*, Chau Meng Huat and Krishnavanie Shanmugam reflect on their own experiences to explore teacher agency through the notion of teacher as changemaker. In this article, the authors highlight the fact that teachers are not only changemakers in their own right but they also enable others to be changemakers.

The article by Alexius Chia, Stefanie Chye, and Bee-Leng Chua, *The Autonomous Thinking Teacher: Preparing English Teachers for the 21st Century* is also based on the reflections of teachers, this time from those in initial teacher preparation (ITP) programmes in Singapore. The authors show how a Professional Practice and Inquiry initiative in the programme helped English pre-service teachers to develop into autonomous thinking teachers.

Ngee Derk Tiong's article, *The Weight of Our Words: Language and Teacher Agency from the Perspective of Gee's 'Cultural Models'*, looks at another way that teacher agency can be developed. Based on an analysis of Malaysian English-language teachers' meetings, Tiong suggests that how teachers talk about the relevant domains of their practice can result in shifts to cultural models that are more agentic or otherwise.

The power of teacher-related discourse is further reiterated in the article by Ramesh Nair. In *Reconstructing Teacher Identity through Contesting Narratives of ELT Associations*, Nair draws on the frameworks of Systemic-Functional Linguistics and visual grammar to demonstrate how discourse in posters disseminated through MELTA's social media platforms highlights teachers as trained professionals and experts in the field of ELT. He argues that such positive representation of teachers can counter negative and damaging discourses about teachers, and thus, points out that ELT associations can play a role to mitigate emerging discourses which threaten the reputation of the teaching profession.

The final article by Tamas Kiss and Hazelynn Rimbar, *English language Teacher Agency in Sarawak: Exploiting Teaching Materials*, explores English language teacher agency within the context of materials exploitation. The authors indicate that the use of international books in all primary schools have been a challenge to many English teachers in the rural areas of Sarawak,

and thus, these teachers have taken actions to enact their professional beliefs and values which have strengthened their agential roles.

We are hopeful that these articles on the various facets of teacher agency will encourage us to reflect on our own assumptions and practices. The seminars, workshops and conferences organised by MELTA as well as this journal provides excellent platforms for English language educators to develop agency through continuous learning and through the sharing of experiences, practices, and research. Thus, we hope to ‘hear’ more of your voices at these platforms.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the authors who have contributed to this issue. We would also like to thank all the reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.

We would like to dedicate this issue in memory of Professor Dr Ganakumaran Subramaniam, past president of MELTA, as the teacher agency was definitely something that was close to his heart. His passing is a great loss not only to MELTA but to the English language teaching fraternity in Malaysia. We would also like to acknowledge two stalwarts of The English Teacher, the late Dr. Hyacinth Gaudart and the late Dr. Basil S. Wijayasuriya.

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