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Malaysian ESL Teachers' Perspectives on Curriculum Shift to Global Englishes Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT) curriculum proposal aims to ensure students are equipped with the skills to communicate in global contexts but for curriculum innovation to take place, many related areas must be explored to fully comprehend the practicability of the proposed curriculum. Therefore, as key stakeholders and main recipients of the innovative ELT proposal, the aim of this qualitative study is to examine Malaysian ESL teachers' perspective on the feasibility and practicability of a GELT curriculum shift in Malaysia through focus group discussions (n=12). The findings of this study demonstrated that the teachers' overall perception towards GELT was mixed due to several factors, including attachment to Standard English and desire for clearer guidelines. Additionally, various barriers to the implementation of a GELT-inspired curriculum in Malaysian schools were identified, such as the lack of suitable teaching materials, along with suggestions to overcome the barriers. Practical implications from the study include the need to initiate change in teacher education as well as the immediate need to develop an example of the GELT curriculum that must also be tried and tested via a pilot study.

KEYWORDS: Global Englishes; Global Englishes Language Teaching; World Englishes; English language teaching

Introduction

In recent decades, the global spread of English has resulted in 1.5 billion speakers today (Dvyik, 2023). However, there is great disparity in the use of English in real world situations and how it is taught by teachers and practitioners in the English Language Teaching (ELT) context (Kumaravadivelu, 2012), defeating the very purpose of English as a global language. With non-native English speakers (NNESs) outnumbering native English speakers (NESs), for most of them, their priorities have changed – they are no longer learning to master the language but instead to utilize English alongside other languages including their native tongue to function as part of a multilingual or global community (Cook, 2016; Rose et al., 2021; Marlina, 2021).

A shift in the curriculum is long overdue since “the linguistic, cultural and functional diversity associated with English today challenges some of the fundamental assumptions of ELT and requires that we revisit our pedagogical practices” (Matsuda & Friedrich, 2012, p. 17). Ergo, it is unsurprising that the main criticism against the current ELT curriculum is its role in depriving English language learners of more relevant communicative skills, one that aligns with international and intercultural context (Marlina, 2021). This is because ELT classrooms still depend heavily on native-like fluency as the standard norm all speakers must achieve, a monolingual bias that has been argued to not reflect the pluralistic nature and reality of English as a contact language (Galloway & Rose, 2018).

Thus, Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT) was proposed as an innovative ELT curriculum by Galloway (2011). However, a reconceptualization of a curriculum must be approached with utmost consideration by collaborating closely with teachers and practitioners to determine the compatibility, feasibility, and practicality of the curriculum innovation (Canagarajah, 2006). Building on the existing knowledge gap, this study aims to address the following questions:

1. How do Malaysian ESL teachers perceive GELT as a proposed curriculum innovation in Malaysian schools?
2. What do the teachers consider are barriers to implementing a GELT-inspired curriculum and what are their suggestions to overcome the barriers?

Literature Review

Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT)

As part of the Global Englishes (GE) paradigm, which is a fairly recent development in the field of linguistics that combines the diverse yet overlapping perspectives of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), World Englishes (WE), English as an International Language (EIL) and translanguaging, GELT recognizes that multilingualism is the norm, validates learners' linguistic repertoires and does not measure proficiency and competency with reference to native norms (Rose et al., 2021). Below are the six main aims of GELT:

- To increase WE and ELF exposure in language curricula
- To encourage respect for multilingualism in ELT classrooms
- To raise awareness of Global Englishes in ELT classrooms
- To raise awareness of ELF strategies in language curricula
- To emphasize respect for diverse culture and identity in ELT

- To change English teacher-hiring practices in the ELT community (Rose & Galloway, 2019, p. 16).

In other words, GELT seeks to promote English as a language not unnecessarily bound to strict structures but instead mirroring its speakers—a dynamic and unlimited tool to help navigate multicultural and multilingual contexts.

Teachers' attitudes to innovative ELT curriculum

Most of the attitudinal studies regarding an innovative ELT curriculum tend to fall on a split spectrum where the pluralistic framework is acknowledged and appreciated but strong attachment to Standard English remains (Irham et al., 2021; Kusumaningputri et al., 2022). A study by Irham et al. (2021) reported that four teachers displayed ambivalence when it came to an ELF framework in ELT due to demands from stakeholders to align their teaching to native norm standards. Meanwhile, the teachers in Kusumaningputri et al. (2022) agreed there should be multilingual characters in ELT teaching materials but still favored Standard English as the pronunciation model, prioritizing achieving native like fluency to communicate with NESs as the learning goal.

Few studies have set out to investigate what teachers thought of GELT. For instance, research by Galloway and Numajiri (2020) was aimed specifically at investigating pre-service and in-service TESOL practitioners' attitudes towards GELT as well as towards the proposals for, and barriers to, curriculum innovation in addition to the factors influencing such attitudes. In the study, 47 TESOL practitioners demonstrated ambivalence towards the GELT proposal mainly due to their strong attachment to Standard English norms. Similarly, Cargos (2022), who conducted a study with 27 pre-service teachers in a focus group setting, discovered that the teachers generally had a pessimistic view of a GELT curriculum becoming the new norm due to intolerance and lack of GE awareness from stakeholders.

Barriers to curriculum shift

A curriculum shift towards GELT will undoubtedly encounter various barriers. These barriers include the strong attachment to Standard English norms, lack of relevant and authentic teaching materials, lack of teacher awareness, teacher education as well as language assessment (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Rose & Galloway, 2019; Galloway & Numajiri, 2020).

At its core, the source of the barriers is rooted institutionally (Irham et al., 2021; Cargos, 2022). Therefore, unless it is taken up by educational ministries to pave the way for necessary change (e.g., textbooks, teacher education, language assessment etc.), the adoption of a GELT curriculum is unlikely to progress and will remain at the conceptual level.

Yet while literature in the field of GE has grown exponentially, certain regions, such as Malaysia, remain an uncharted territory (Rose et al., 2021) despite English being officially recognized as a second language. In Malaysia, GELT studies are scarce, if not nonexistent, hence the importance of this study to address the existing gap.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted with 12 Malaysian ESL teachers from six secondary government schools using focus group discussions as data. With an average of 15 years of experience across all 12 participants, the participants' personal and professional insights were considered valuable to understanding the feasibility of GELT. Below is the demographic table of the participants:

Table 2: Research participant demographic

Participant	School/Location	Years of teaching experience
Teacher A	School 1 (Selangor)	27 years
Teacher B		20 years
Teacher C		9 years
Teacher D		20 years
Teacher E	School 2 (Selangor)	30 years
Teacher F		8 years
Teacher G		23 years
Teacher H		34 years
Teacher I	School 3 (Johor)	2 years
Teacher J	School 4 (Negeri Sembilan)	2 years
Teacher K	School 5 (Selangor)	6 years
Teacher L	School 6 (Perak)	2 years

The participants were split into three groups, with four participants per group. Two of the focus group discussions were conducted physically within school grounds, while the third focus group was done online via Google Meet. The discussions were audio recorded with permission from the participants, and the duration of all three discussions is approximately two hours and twenty-eight minutes, with the author serving as the moderator. The discussion data was then analyzed using thematic analysis. Finally, the analysis includes thorough discussions of major themes found in the data, using extensive quotes and rich details to support the themes.

Results and discussions:

Malaysian teachers' perception of GELT

Five main themes emerged regarding how the teachers perceived the curriculum proposal, including *attachment to Standard English*, *demand from stakeholders*, *support for GELT aims*, *communicative competence as the teaching goal*, and *desire for clearer guidelines*.

For those who perceived GELT negatively, it was mainly due to their own attachment to Standard English norms alongside the demands and expectations from their higher-ups.

Attachment to Standard English

One of the 12 participants described himself as “old-school,” indicating he favored the traditional ELT curriculum where students must achieve native-like fluency. This participant, teacher H, claimed it was their own personal ideology to teach English as it is spoken and used by NESs based on his own personal experience:

“I believe in, let's say, when you want to teach the language, you have to teach that language in that particular language. I learned that in Germany. So, when they teach German, they teach in German”

In addition, teacher C also used the term “good English”, referring to the English standard of the NESs, as opposed to “bad English”, which is typically a term to describe “those who speak a variety that is seen as differing too much from the idealized, standardized variety, including both native and nonnative speakers of English” (Peterson, 2020, p. 34):

“Ideally, we would want them to speak good English but our main goal is to prepare them to function”

The participants' bias towards native norm standards was prevalent when the topic of Malaysian English was brought up. In both excerpts below, the intolerance is due to the fear of Malaysian English having a negative influence on students' writing, especially for purposes of assessment and examination:

“They (students) will also be sitting for exams, so we are afraid that they might use certain terms. Manglish, yeah, using Manglish words so we don't want that to happen” (Teacher D)

“Sometimes in Malaysian English we use a lot of slang and we use a lot of, like, short forms. So, with the use of Malaysian English in their writing, especially in Malaysian education, because Malaysian education focuses more marks in the writing and reading assessments. So, when they use Malaysian English in their writing, their marks will be quite low” (Teacher I)

Demand from stakeholders

Another prominent factor for the teachers' negative reactions to GELT is the demand from the higher-ups. For example, throughout the focus group discussion, teacher A mentioned “expectations” a few times; her stance is reflected in the following excerpt,

“We have always needed to revert back to the standard English because in our KPM (Ministry of Education), that is the goal... because you want students who can speak the language properly. That is the standard thing, is that standard English... standard pronunciation is proper English”

Another participant, teacher C, also shared an anecdote citing the demand from stakeholders which included her direct superior, in this case her supervisor:

“During my practical years, I was taught that we are to teach our students strictly RP (Received Pronunciation) ... my lecturer was like strictly you have to, like, reshape their language”

This finding is similar to those of Irham et al. (2021) and Cargos (2022), in which the latter concludes that unless there is explicit and major pressure from those in the bottom-up category, top-down changes are unlikely to happen. Irham et al. (2021) went on to adequately summarized the issue: the institutional attachment to Standard English norms will understandably result in teachers having limited choice but to adhere to them in their pedagogical practices, hence their less than welcoming reception to GELT.

On the other hand, teachers who were open to GELT resonated with the proposal's aim and aligned their teaching goal with that of GELT:

Support for GELT aims

During the group discussion, participants were provided with the six aims of GELT and were asked to give their feedback on the proposal. For Teacher I, the fifth aim, “emphasize respect for diverse culture and identity in ELT” was interesting because she believed students nowadays lack respect for neighboring cultures:

“I noticed that the students quite lack the understanding about other cultures. Even though in Malaysia, in class, they lack respect, like, they make fun of the language, they make fun of their friend's language. You know, they don't feel that it's actually wrong for them to do that. So, we have to explain, like really explain, in depth. So, I think the fifth part is actually quite interesting”

Another participant, Teacher J, agreed with her opinion and elaborated that, exposing students to other English varieties such as Vietnamese English or Indonesian English is important:

“But we must also respect the diversity of the culture. We must embrace the uniqueness of every Asian country (Englishes) as long as, to me, as long as the message is getting across then it's okay”

Other participants also acknowledged the need for the sixth GELT aim, “change English teacher-hiring practices in the ELT community” by recounting a previous program in Malaysia where native speakers were hired to teach English in public schools. Teacher H recalled the program as “defeating the purpose of teaching English” because the hired teachers were not qualified to teach.

Teacher H's view was also supported by Teacher C, who was a student on that program and was taught by a native speaker and shared her disappointment at the native speakers' lack of examination preparation during lessons:

“He didn't... he didn't prepare us for that, like, but we were like, he was still like, for nearly, for the fun of it”

Communicative competence as the teaching goal

The receptiveness towards GELT was also because the goal of making students “multicompetent users of English” resonated with some of the participants. According to Teacher L, this was especially relevant for her low-proficiency students because the goal of achieving native-like fluency is impossible in her context:

“I'm teaching *Orang Asli* (indigenous people), so they are only exposed to English during class and that is six periods a week. So, my objective is not to teach them perfect English, but to expose them to English, to try and get them to use English... so my goal is just for them to be comfortable with (the) language”

As for high proficiency students, teacher J also believes communicative competence is still a relevant goal for them:

“The main intention is for them to be able and to be confidently communicate in English”

And finally, the ambivalent reaction from some teachers was mainly because they desired more explicit and clear guidelines of the GELT proposal.

Desire for clearer guidelines

For teacher B and teacher J, the proposal presented was a bit too abstract and they commented on the need for more in-depth guidelines to help them understand GELT better. According to teacher B:

“There're no clear guidelines. What they want to achieve, how? How do you assess when there's so many roadblocks? So how... how would you carry out something that is, you know, that is so, so, so wide and open. Whereas whatever that we're doing here is very focused and we are trying to build up the scaffolding of the basic of everything”

The above excerpt further highlights the need for GELT researchers to collaborate with teachers and practitioners to develop a GELT curriculum that factors in both content and assessment practices (Marlina, 2021). Without an explicit example, convincing teachers that GELT-based lessons are doable and viable (Boonsuk et al, 2021) would be impossible which will subsequently affect potential acceptance of the curriculum innovation.

Thus far, the mixed reception towards GELT aligned with another GELT study by Cargos (2022), whereby the pre-service teachers regarded the GELT proposal in a pessimistic light, particularly in terms of the feasibility of the curriculum and the prospect of it being widely accepted as an alternative ELT curriculum.

Barriers to implementing a GELT inspired curriculum

Three barriers were noted in the interview data: *stakeholders' attachment to Standard English*, *the lack of suitable teaching materials*, and *the risk of GELT being too overwhelming for students and teachers alike*.

Stakeholders' attachment to Standard English

One of the most frequently mentioned barriers by the teachers is the attachment to Standard English norms specifically on the part of key stakeholders – e.g., the government, the teachers, and the parents. Teacher K believed that without support from the higher ups, implementing GELT would be difficult:

“We need space, we need recognition. We need some sort of examples given to us like allow it (Malaysian English) in national debates, allow it in national public speaking competitions, allow it in universities you know? Allow it to happen and then it also follows suit, you know, kindergarten, but if the higher levels of everything require native standards, then how is it ever going to begin?”

One of the teachers also speculated on parents' possible reaction to GELT:

“I think, also, based on their background also... because you know like the students in the urban areas where the parents are more, you know like uptight, so they might find the introduction of GELT would, actually would, like, you know, downgrade the standard of English” (Teacher I)

Here, the othering of the non-standard non-native variety is a consequence of the pervasive native-speakerism ideology held by key stakeholders hence why the local variety is rejected in favor of British English or American English (Wang, 2015). In addition, to some stakeholders, Standard English is associated with prestige and the educated (Honey, 1997) and anything other than that standard is seen as lesser or, in this case, a “downgrade”. Therefore, the issue of intolerance for diversity amongst key stakeholders such as the education ministry, teachers, and parents, must be tackled first before a GELT curriculum could be introduced (Cargos, 2022).

Lack of suitable teaching materials

Appropriate teaching materials in GELT should include diverse cultures and identities, including local or neighboring ones, and not just limited to Anglophone cultures. However, lack of appropriate materials that are GE-based is another prominent barrier and this factor have resulted in teachers relying on current ELT materials that are biased towards NES and NES culture, as brought up by teacher K:

“The content is largely on Western culture. So, it's hard, it's hard”

Development of a more inclusive framework in the materials is incredibly scarce (Cogo, 2015) and the only other alternative for teachers to access suitable materials is via online. However, the burden of finding or creating their own teaching material that is more localized is another prominent issue, as commented by a participant:

“But to find resources is quite hard. We want to find (local) listening resources” (Teacher I)

The risk of overwhelming students and teachers

The participants also raised their concern about GELT being too overwhelming for both students and teachers alike.

“And if we were to introduce global Englishes, it might be overwhelming to the students, right? ... Following this GELT proposal, I think many teachers would be demotivated to teach in the future because we have to always get ourselves familiarized with the new introduced or implemented curriculum. We have to change our way of teaching the students, right?” (Teacher F)

In the excerpt above, teacher F's criticism stemmed from Malaysia's history of having reformed their education policy numerous times, including the English language curriculum (Abu Bakar et al., 2021). While teacher H believed that “teaching is one of the only professions where changes always happen,” too many curriculum adjustments can add on to the stress of the teacher, who must also balance the expectations of the school administrators and parents while ensuring that students' learning needs are met in the classroom.

As for the risk of overwhelming the students, it was a concern mainly attributed to lower-proficiency students. According to teacher A, the students “wouldn't know how to differentiate the usage [World Englishes] correctly,” while teacher L said:

“Then as for the accent and all that. You know, for students who are only exposed to English during the classroom. It's hard for them to keep up so... ”

One of the participants, teacher A, further added that if the students could not differentiate formal English and informal English in their examinations, then she doubted whether introducing GELT would be a choice supported by the stakeholders such as the higher-ups:

“... there are some students that cannot differentiate like what is formal English that they should write in their exam, how they should write in their exam and what is the difference between the English that they use informally... so I don't think in the short term or even in the long term, the government would wish to use World Englishes in the lesson itself.”

She then brought up language assessment as another source of confusion for teachers, claiming that it would “be quite difficult and the teachers need to know a lot of Global Englishes to make sure that she or he is able to assess the students properly”, though it could be argued that her concern is due to the unclear guidelines in the GELT proposal and lack of examples of a GELT assessment.

In summary, the first two barriers cited by the participants have been established in several other studies (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Jaramillo et al., 2020; Choi & Liu, 2020), thus confirming the legitimacy of these concerns. However, the third barrier “the risk of overwhelming students and teachers” has not been raised in GE or GELT literature; this finding reflects other concerns that teachers in a different context may have in relation to the GELT proposal.

Suggestions to overcome GELT barriers in Malaysian schools

Teachers also put forward their suggestions to overcome the barriers which include a *well-designed pilot study, introducing GELT as a course for the more advanced ESL students and transforming existing teacher education.*

Pilot study

In response to unclear GELT guidelines, participants suggested a pilot study to test and confirm the feasibility and reliability of GELT in Malaysian schools. Two of the participants, teacher G and teacher J, emphasized that the pilot study must be conducted in various educational contexts, as revealed in the following excerpts:

“... Pilot projects, probably in various backgrounds, yeah. The implementation and the execution whether it is effective or not for the students to learn the language? And the justifications all must be really established. Really, then only I guess parents will accept the idea” (Teacher G)

“I do agree with the pilot study, but we need to accommodate various kinds of schools, for example like Teacher L teaching the *Orang Asli* (indigenous people) students, they need to do that also. And also on peoples [sic] from the urban areas. Yeah, it's not fair for the pilot study to be conducted in the rural area only. Whereas in urban areas, we use the native English. That's not fair. So it's one for all, uh, it's all for one, one from all” (Teacher J)

A pilot study of a GELT curriculum has yet to be conducted – at least, as far as the researcher currently knows. At the moment, most GE or GELT research comprises either attitudinal studies (Boonsuk et al., 2021; Cargos, 2022; Palese et al., 2022) or conceptual research papers (Savski & Prabjandee, 2022). Therefore, a pilot study of a GELT curriculum is much needed because, as mentioned before, without an explicit example of a GELT curriculum for reference, convincing key stakeholders of a curriculum innovation such as GELT would be impossible.

GELT for advanced learners

Participants who failed to see the relevance of GELT as an alternative English curriculum in Malaysia also suggested offering it as a course instead – in particular, an extracurricular course for more advanced or highly proficient students:

“... I don't think that this would be replacing the current English subject that we have now, particularly maybe this will be if it is implemented, it could be an additional subject for students to take up” (Teacher F)

“Globally, unless, like you were teaching, like, really, like advanced students might, you might want to like expose them” (Teacher G)

One of the participants, Teacher A, believed Standard English is a good enough introduction or basis for students (“... we provide a frame for them to fall into...”) and if they are interested to know more about other varieties of English, GELT could be an optional course for them (“... they can explore themselves later when they have the skill, when they have the ammunition...”).

Teacher education

And finally, one participant suggested a revamp of teacher education as changes in language attitudes can only be tackled during the training period, not after:

“Yeah, I think, in my opinion, it has to begin from teacher training level. Because it's very difficult for teachers to have a mindset shift. So when we had a change in curriculum is to move the teachers perspective is, is a very tough [sic]. Our situation

because teachers' experience level, their own belief system, how they view varieties of English... So it has to begin in teachers training itself" (Teacher K)

Through teacher education, teachers and practitioners will be prepared and equipped with the right expectations and beliefs for an innovative ELT curriculum (Borg, 2018). Hence, the pressure to ignite a chain of change must begin by reforming or adapting teacher education programs – in particular, by exposing these teachers to a pluralistic and intercultural awareness perspective of English (Baker, 2011), including an introductory course to WE.

In terms of suggestions, two of the participants' recommendations, which are the pilot study and teacher training, are also well established in GE-related studies (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Rose et al., 2021). Hence, these suggestions should be taken into serious consideration especially since they constitute input from key stakeholders in English language teaching, whom GE researchers must collaborate closely with to ensure successful GELT adoption in Malaysia (Canagarajah, 2006; Galloway & Numajiri, 2020).

However, the second suggestion "GELT for advanced learners" goes against the aspirations of GELT – that is, to challenge traditional ELT pedagogies that do not reflect the realities of English as a global language. Therefore, this suggestion, as well intentioned as it may be, is not sufficiently viable to overcome barriers to the implementation of GELT in Malaysian schools.

Conclusion

Thus far, there are two practical implications that can be drawn from the findings. To address widespread native speakerism that exists in the Malaysian education system requires a careful and critical approach: first, it needs to happen at teacher's training level, as recommended by Chen et al. (2021). Another practical implication is the immediate need to develop an explicit example of the GELT curriculum that must also be tried and tested via a pilot study. As the findings reveal, teachers need a reference without which their uncertainty will continue to grow thus making the GELT proposal harder for them to comprehend and accept. It is without a doubt then that a pilot study is an essential next step to the curriculum innovation since it is also the perfect opportunity to carry out key experiments including testing GE-based teaching materials that are inclusive of diverse cultures and developing GE-based language assessment (Rose et al., 2021).

Of course, this study is not without its limitations such as its small sample size, its limited perspectives of just one key stakeholder (the teachers) and the exclusion of pre-service teachers. Nonetheless, the researchers hope that the insights provided in this paper will prove useful in understanding the feasibility of GELT in Malaysia.

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