

From Chalk to Digital: Evolution, Challenges, and Identity in the Careers of Retired Malaysian ESL Teachers

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to understand how retired ESL teachers described the evolution of their teaching practices throughout their years of service. The study also sought to understand how the challenges they encountered further influenced the shaping of their attitudes about education and the development of their professional identities. In this study, narrative inquiry methodology was used to explore the transformative journey and understand the lived experiences of two retired Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) secondary school teachers. In keeping with narrative inquiry methodology, in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with the two retired Malaysian ESL teachers who had been purposefully sampled. Separate narrative portraits were developed to describe the lived experiences of the teachers, focusing on the main themes of the evolution of teaching practice, adaptation to changes, challenges and shaping of professional identities. The study found that the teachers experienced several shifts in educational policies, student demographics, curriculum and teaching methodologies throughout their careers. Major adaptations and challenges were related to the advent of the digital age, fulfilling the expectations of school authorities and building teaching confidence. The study also showed that retired teachers acknowledged significant self-development, growth and transformation in terms of skills, knowledge and character by the end of their professional service. They also perceived no demarcation between personal and professional identities and continued to view themselves as teachers despite having retired from the service.

Keywords: English as a Second Language, narrative inquiry, lived experiences, self-development

1. Introduction

The education system of Malaysia, as is the case in most countries, has at its core the school-teachers who play a pivotal role in shaping its educational landscape. The teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) in the Malaysian classroom has likewise evolved throughout the decades; the changes have been many and varied, encompassing aspects of the syllabus, methodologies, assessments, materials, student demographics and even the expected learning outcomes (F Mudin, 2019).

Although these shifts have been documented through formal policy analyses or institutional reports, the human dimension connected to these educational changes are still critically underexplored. This includes how the main long-term agents of the change, namely the teachers themselves, have experienced these transformations. The lived experiences of retired ESL teachers, which are often made up of firsthand witness accounts of educational reform, linguistic policy shifts, and cultural adaptation, are also repositories of historical and pedagogical wisdom. Understanding the lived experiences of retired ESL teachers, therefore, becomes a foundational necessity for informing future educational policy, leadership development, and teacher training. Apart from that, their reflections also provide unique insight into the translation of education policies into classroom realities, which in turn influence broader attitudes towards English language instruction and national identity.

The charting of this evolution, together with the reasons for curriculum and pedagogical transformations, would best be narrated by the teachers who had lived through these experiences, namely, retired ESL school teachers. Apart from the overt changes and transformations in both physical and non-physical school landscapes, there is the often-ignored factor of the teachers' individual journey as a school-teacher, their inner thoughts, challenges, experiences, and how this personal journey in the teaching service may have transformed them. Their perceptions of the entire ecosystem of the Malaysian education landscape, particularly in the teaching of English as a Second Language and how it has affected their values, attitudes and views about education, leadership, and administration, would undoubtedly be of great value and provide vital information to current research related to the education system.

A study in this area, however, would require a deeper dive, delving into personal narratives and lived experiences.

Narrative research, which is a distinct form of qualitative research, allows for a deep exploration of individuals' experiences over time. Data is usually gathered from a single or few individuals and is in the form of stories, which are collections of individual lived experiences. The

meaning of these experiences as relevant for the individual and their interpretation of them is reported and discussed. (Alvelos, 2022; Clandinin, 2022; Downey, 2019). Retired Malaysian ESL teachers who have navigated the changes in the educational landscape for over thirty years have accumulated a wealth of experiences throughout their careers. A narrative approach would enable the recounting of these experiences and unique personal challenges in their own words. It can bring new dimensions to existing perceptions related to the teaching of English in current ESL classrooms. Comparisons can also be made to reflect on what has changed and what has endured, and these can help make value judgements about methods, policies and transformations over the years.

The experiences of retired Malaysian ESL teachers also bring information on possible shifts in policies and attitudes towards the English language. Their narratives also provide insights that are specific to the Malaysian setting, such as cultural diversity and the challenges in ESL teaching related to these diverse needs. Adapting to changes in teaching methodologies, curriculum, and the advent of the digital age will be some of the experiences retired teachers have undergone. Although several studies have been made on issues related to Malaysian teachers' retirement (Goh, 2011, Muhammad 2022, Mustapha et al, 2023) and the development of the Malaysian education landscape (Aziz& Kashinathan, 2021., Zhao, 2022), there have not yet been any studies conducted on the lived experiences of retired Malaysian teachers. There has also been insufficient research with a narrative approach on retired Malaysian school teachers, where the personal stories of the participants become the main data for the findings. As such, this study has sought to provide a novel approach to research on retired Malaysian teachers by addressing a critical gap in understanding the human legacy of Malaysia's ESL teaching history and offering grounded insights from those who have not only witnessed the changes but have actively shaped them.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The present study, therefore, aimed to address these gaps and provide the information needed on the transformative journey of retired Malaysian ESL school-teachers by examining the evolution of their own pedagogical approaches and adaptations made throughout their years of service. The study also aimed to explore the perceptions of these teachers towards the changes they encountered and how they addressed these changes. Apart from that, the challenges that were faced by these teachers both in their professional careers and personal lives and how these have influenced or shaped their personal and professional identities are also explored.

1.2 Research Questions

In view of the objectives mentioned above, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How do retired Malaysian ESL school teachers describe the evolution of their teaching practices over the course of their careers?
 - a) How would they describe the changes in pedagogical approaches and teaching methodologies and how have they adapted to these changes?
 - b) What are the challenges they have encountered during their teaching careers and how did these challenges shape their professional identities?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study is of primary significance to the educational landscape of English language teaching in Malaysia to provide insight into the evolution of English language teaching over at least three decades (1980-2010) from the lens of ESL teachers who have experienced firsthand the changes related to curriculum, teaching methods, policies, settings and student demographics. The study will also show the extent to which the responses to these changes may have impacted their professional development. The in-depth exploration through narrative inquiry will uncover dimensions of responsiveness towards external impositions on English language teachers and how they have coped with these changes.

These findings could also be relevant in other countries where the English language has had a similar history in the education scene. Comparative studies can be made to see what similarities or differences there are in the experiences and outcomes of teachers who have experienced similar journeys, although in different geographical domains.

By uncovering the layers of transformations in curriculum, pedagogy, teaching methodologies, outcomes, and impacts, the findings can directly inform educational policies and practices in Malaysia. Finally, this narrative research will also provide the avenue for participants to reflect on their journey, their experiences, trials and triumphs of school teaching and this can in turn contribute to a deeper understanding of their own lives.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Narrative Research

Clandinin (2013) defines narrative inquiry as a "a way of understanding and inquiring into" the experiences of others and yourself." The telling of personal life stories and the stories of others also helps humans to make sense of their experience of the world, and in doing so, we can all be considered characters in our own stories and the stories of others that we tell. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Bell, 2002; Craig et al., 2020). Stories need a social context to be moulded and can never be constructed from a social vacuum; rather, they are a result of interactions between the storyteller and the audience. (Thomas, 2012, Clandinin, 2006) Bruner (1990) notes that human life is fundamentally narrative, and stories are a common way of organizing knowledge. We understand the world through the means of the story, which allows us to make meaning out of what we have experienced. This study of experience as a story is the basis for narrative inquiry, which is "first and foremost a way of thinking about experience" (Connelly, 2006; Storr, 2020; Glazer, 2020).

2.2 Professional Evolution and Reflection

The general view on reflection, especially among education practitioners, is that it consists of considering experiences from the past or present, learning from the outcomes, and becoming better prepared for similar situations in the future. (Ben-Peretz, 2002, Orakcı, 2021. Garcia et al, 2022). Reflective practice also allows educators to be continually engaged and involved in professional development and improvement (Downey & Clandinin 2019, Elliot, 2021) Brookfield (2017) uses the analogy of a gyroscope when referring to reflection and talks about how reflection allows educators to stay balanced among a changing environment and also guides them through challenging times in their careers.

In the case of retired teachers, this reflection often can take the form of a personal narrative, which not only informs the audience of the journey they have undergone and the challenges they may have faced, but also sheds light on how they navigated through the evolution of the educational landscape throughout their many years of service. The narratives of retired teachers who have experienced shifting educational landscapes also often highlight the role of teacher adaptability and continuous professional development (Lanada, 2021; Zhao, 2022; Meegan, 2023). The adjustment needed to accommodate the changing and diverse needs of their student population and the growing need for inclusivity is also another significant aspect of professional evolution. (Loughland, 2019; Sulaiman, 2021; Zhao, 2022).

2.3 Challenges and Moulding of Professional Identity

The narratives of retired teachers often include accounts of challenges faced during their careers, and how these may have shaped both their personal and professional identities as well as their perceptions of the education system. Understanding how these challenges influenced their professional identities can offer valuable insights into the nuances of teaching both globally and in the Malaysian context. Timsina (2021) discusses how the English language teachers' identity is moulded throughout the years through professional development activities, different social interactions, the diverse roles that are required and the experience of various emotions. Narrative analysis of work-life histories of retired teachers has also uncovered the layers of emotions related to what is termed as 'emotional labour, commitment and resilience'. This has also been connected to their occupational or professional identity. (Kirk et al,2010; Pruaño et al, 2022; Zhao, Q. 2022).

From a global context, another factor that both in-service and retired teachers have often discussed is the added pressure of non-teaching duties and the impact of administrative pressures on teachers' job satisfaction (Jentsch et al., 2023; Toropova et al., 2021; Pruaño et al., 2022). The multiple roles both in and out of the classroom apart from teaching duties such as the additional roles of curriculum developer, invigilator, examiners, discipline control and clerical duties have also been widely discussed as causes of concern even leading to early retirement among teachers in some cases (Clark,2021; Collie,2018; Glazer,2020).

2.4 Beyond Retirement

Studies on the lived experiences of retired teachers have found that their approach to life during their retirement years is profoundly affected by their lived experiences. (Cahill, 2021; Glazer, 2020; P.Lanada & R. Ballaret, 2021). Moving on beyond retirement, however, studies have also found that teachers are continuing to play both immersive and significant roles in society, both in the field of education and out of it. (Kirk & Wall, 2010; Ayoob et al., 2020; P.Lanada & R. Ballaret, 2021). Some of these roles include leadership positions such as mentoring in-service or pre-service teachers, or participating in round-table discussions.(Kirk & Wall, 2010; Mokgolodi, 2022; Tesoro & Barrios, 2023) Apart from continuing to be active in education-related fields, retired teachers have also found fulfilment in pursuing interests that are non-education related but part of their interests.

2.5 Evolution of the Malaysian Education Landscape from 1970

Since the 1970s, Malaysia's education landscape has undergone significant changes driven by societal needs and global demands. Following the 1969 racial riots, the government introduced the New Education Policy in 1970 to promote national unity through Bahasa Malaysia as the primary medium of instruction. This led to the conversion of all English-medium schools to Malay-medium schools, relegating English to a second language. The reduction in English exposure resulted in lower proficiency levels, especially among rural students. By the 1980s and 1990s, recognizing the importance of English for international trade, higher education, and technological advancement, Malaysia revised its English curriculum, adopting more communicative teaching approaches. The introduction of the KBSM (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah) in 1989 established a standardized secondary school curriculum that focused on holistic development, including intellectual, emotional, and physical growth. Teachers were integral in interpreting and delivering this curriculum effectively.

In 2003, the government shifted the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics to English through the ETEMS (English for Teaching Mathematics and Science) program (Rashid, 2017; Heng, 2006; Mosiur, 2021), aiming to boost English proficiency and prepare students for the global job market. However, the policy faced criticism, particularly from those disadvantaged by low English proficiency. Consequently, the policy was reversed in 2009, and instruction reverted to Bahasa Malaysia by 2011. Balancing the need for English proficiency with the importance of Bahasa Malaysia, the Ministry of Education introduced the 'Upholding Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthening English' program. The Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025, launched in 2012, sought to address issues like education quality, access, and national unity, focusing on improving student outcomes, teacher quality, and technology use in education. (Hardman, 2014; Rashid, 2017).

In 2017, the KSSM (Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah) replaced KBSM, emphasizing student-centered learning, critical thinking, and holistic development, aligning with MEB's goals of preparing students for global challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further accelerated the shift to digital learning, with the Ministry supporting online platforms to ensure education continuity during lockdowns.

(Asmawi, 2022; Ab.Rashid, 2017). While these policy changes aimed to keep Malaysia competitive globally and respond to societal needs, reactions from educators to these changes have been mixed.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by the philosophical roots of narrative research, which are based on Dewey's (1938) principles of continuity of past, present, and future experiences and interactions within situations. (Emden, 1998; Clandinin, 2022; Egeland & Ness, 2021). Narrative, according to this understanding, needs to be understood both as a personal experience and within a specific context encompassing time or continuity, place or situation, and the social environment or interaction. (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021, Clandinin, 2022). This is also often referred to as the 'three-dimensional narrative inquiry space'. It is imperative to keep in mind during narrative inquiry that humans' experience with the world is constantly changing and the inquiry needs to be correspondingly flexible to accommodate these changes. (Caine, 2019; Rabelo, 2022; Wells, 2011).

Beyond Dewey's experiential philosophy, this study also draws from broader theoretical underpinnings within the social constructionist paradigm. Instead of traditional social scientific inquiry, which has realist assumptions and concentrates on information collection, narrative analysis focuses on the very construction of narratives and the role they play in the social construction of identity. (Rosenwald & Ochsberg 1992; Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021; Villegas et al., 2020) Thus, narrative analysis is situated within a social constructionist paradigm and offers an alternative approach to understanding both the production and analysis of qualitative data.

The study also aligns with the model proposed by Riessman (2008), who emphasized that narrative inquiry also needs to consider the performative and contextual aspects of storytelling. According to Riessman, meaning in narratives is co-constructed between narrator and listener and shaped by the socio-cultural context of the story.

Narrative inquiry, therefore, apart from being a methodology, is also a theoretical orientation that accords privilege to voice, context, temporality, and identity construction.

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3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The conceptual framework of narrative inquiry builds upon Dewey's view of experience, which is studied through the interconnecting dimensions of the personal-social, temporality, and place. (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) As such, in this study, the researchers had to continually shift their gaze from the personal (inward), that is, feelings, hopes and dispositions, to the social (outward) existential conditions and to specific boundaries of inquiry landscapes.

In line with the objectives of the study to explore the narratives of retired Malaysian ESL teachers, narrative analysis emerged as a suitable framework to provide this study with the robust methodological approach that was needed. A qualitative narrative research design was used, using in-depth interviews and field notes. The research process involved several steps: purposeful identification of participants, conducting multiple rounds of in-depth interviews, recording and transcribing these conversations and composing field notes during and after the interviews. These steps allowed the researcher to remain attentive to the participants' contexts and shifting meanings over time, which is central to narrative inquiry. As the aim of the study was to explore the lived experiences of retired Malaysian ESL teachers, their individual stories were collected with a narrative inquiry approach. The researcher then became the interpreter of these stories.

3.2 Narrative Research in Teacher Education

The argument for teacher knowledge to be considered as being built through stories has been presented by researchers of teacher education who also purport that, from the epistemological perspective, the story is the most authentic way of understanding teaching from the viewpoint of the teacher herself. (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002; Farrell, E., 2020). The narrative interpretations of teachers' lived experiences, including their personal and professional journeys, come most effectively through the retelling and reliving of teachers' personal stories. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2020; Craig et al, 2020; Bailey, 2021). In this approach which is largely experiential-philosophical, teacher knowledge rather than being objective or independent of the teacher, is considered to be the total of the teacher's experiences. The concept of teachers' professional knowledge landscapes is built on the idea that teachers' practical knowledge is shaped by their narratives and the environment in which they work. According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006) teacher knowledge is "in the teacher's past experience, in the teacher's present mind and body, and in the plans and actions"

3.3 Participants and Data Collection

In line with the nature of narrative research, the participant selection was purposeful. Two retired Malaysian ESL school teachers were purposefully selected based on their teaching experiences, school settings, subject areas taught, expertise and willingness to share their 'lived stories.' Informed consent was first obtained from the participants to ensure that they understood the purpose of the study, their rights and the

confidentiality of their narratives. In the study, both participants have been anonymized using pseudonyms, and the data were de-identified to protect the privacy of participants. An interview protocol was constructed based on research objectives and questions. This also included a script for explaining the purpose of the interviews to each participant and for recording relevant demographic data.

The initial interviews with each participant were conducted via phone to gather demographic data, obtain informed consent and schedule a one-on-one interview. In-depth open interviews were conducted with each participant to elicit detailed narratives about their teaching experiences according to research objectives. After the initial interview for demographic data and consent, each participant was met three times, and each interview was conducted as a one-to-one conversation lasting between one and two hours. All conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed. The conversations ranged from stories of their career journeys, experiences, challenges, thoughts, feelings, changes in educational landscapes and their evolutions throughout their teaching careers. Researchers' field notes were also collected and recorded throughout the interviews.

3.4 Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Related reflections of the researcher were added during the transcribing process. Participants were given the transcriptions to read and verify before further analysis was done. Participants' responses were then collected and examined.

The term “storying stories” (O'Dea, 2021; McCormack, 2004) or 'storying' (Golsteijn & Wright, 2013; Polkinghorne, 2007) refers to the creation of narratives from data. Narrative portraits are created during narrative analysis, where cohesive stories are told with a clear beginning, middle, and end, concerning research questions. Dimensions of location and temporality are taken into consideration in the creation of narrative portraits. In this study, the researchers retold and rewrote individual participants' stories as narrative portraits using a narrative format of presentation, ensuring that their participants' voices were conveyed authentically in the retelling.

The researchers also examined the results of all parts of the research and made comparisons. The specific themes that emerged, which were relevant to the research questions and objectives, were highlighted. The researchers then summarized the findings and explained themes and patterns in narrative form in the report, which was written using rich description. In their report, the researchers sought to answer the main research questions and sub-questions. The findings from the study were shared with the participants through active collaboration to verify the interpretation of their narratives. The findings were also subject to member checks.

To ensure that the data was robust and trustworthy, the researchers ensured that there was prolonged engagement with the participants. Detailed field notes were maintained. Triangulation between all data sources was done, including interview transcripts and field notes. Attention was also given to consistency and coherence of emerging themes in relation to the research objectives. This helped to strengthen the alignment between participants' narratives and the central question of the study on the evolution of teaching practices over their careers.

3.5 Validity and Trustworthiness

In narrative analysis, the assessment of validity cannot depend on the representation of 'truth', as this might not be possible. The focus is on trustworthiness rather than validity, and the process of interpreting the narratives and stories should be made transparent. (Adler, 2022; Polkinghorne, 2007; Stahl & King, 2020) Trustworthiness in this study has been sought by the researchers by maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process and by acknowledging any researcher's biases and assumptions that may influence data collection and analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Narrative Portraits

Two retired ESL Malaysian school teachers participated in this study.

Pseudonym	Experience as an ESL teacher		Qualification/s
	Period	Number of years	
Andi	1983-2015	33	Degree in Math/Masters in TESL
Jay	1990-2020	30	Degree in TESL

4.1.1 Andi

Andi was born in Malaysia a few years after independence and describes her childhood as one that prioritized education above anything else. Andi was already a top performer in school, excelling in English literature. However, when she finished high school, she was streamed into the pure sciences, as was the practice for higher-achieving students during those days. After high school, she obtained a teaching scholarship and graduated as a Mathematics teacher. In her first posting apart from Maths, she was also tasked with teaching English due to a lack of English teachers in her school at that time.

I taught Maths and also English to Upper Secondary students. It took me some time to realise that being good in a language was not the same as knowing how to teach it. I had training to teach Maths but no training for English. Still, I had knowledge of pedagogical principles, classroom management all that. I had the language. But it was a little like playing it by ear.

Andi confessed that initially, she gave little thought to her student demographics. The students she was facing were from a rural village and had little or no exposure to English outside the classroom.

The medium of instruction at that point was Bahasa Malaysia, unlike her own schooling years.

Looking back, Andi remembers this distinct memory.

I took the whole class on a short walk trip through the village. It was a form 5 class, and they had to write a brief report of the things they had seen and experienced during the walk. The scenery was beautiful, I remember. The hills and countryside with green paddy fields and friendly villagers. When they came back, the first report I read said, 'on way I see two tail goat and one fruit house.' I actually thought they had seen an orchard or a goat with two tails until I realized they had literally translated from Malay 'dua ekor kambing, sebuah rumah.'. Andi says that what she learned from that experience was to remember who her students were and begin with their level, not where they were supposed to be but where they actually were.

Two key takeaways that Andi states from her first few years of being an ESL teacher was that there was a difference between having content knowledge and the knowledge to teach a language. The second was that despite whatever curriculum that was prescribed the only teaching that worked was what actually matched the students' level and what they really needed.

Andi later moved on to three other schools in different states in the country and at every school she taught English together with other subjects. After ten years of teaching she decided to pursue her post-graduate Masters degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) This according to her gave her the real confidence.

While I felt like I was playing it by ear previously I felt really qualified this time. It made a difference. I understood the different methods, the approaches. No matter what they say, having the theoretical knowledge and the academic qualifications do matter. If nothing else, it made me feel legitimate, if I can use that word! Andi also spoke about the transitions of policies that occurred during her first twenty years of teaching. It was the communicative approach right around the time I started teaching. Then the KBSM came in and they brought in the ETEMS policy. I was appointed as a master trainer and I had to conduct training sessions to other groups of Maths and Science teachers to help them in the transition. It was another boost to my confidence, to my career development but I felt sorry for the teachers. I could see how some of them were struggling.

A major milestone in her teaching happened when the literature in English component was introduced into the ESL classroom.

I really enjoyed teaching the literature lessons the most. Perhaps even more than my students. It makes a great difference when you enjoy what you teach, you love what you teach.

According to Andi although many of her TESL colleagues felt the same way that she did, most of them eventually succumbed to the pressure of school leaders' expectations of examination results and begun teaching to the test.

In the end all that mattered was the exam grade. And I say this with a little shame, that at times I also did the same. Just roll out past year exam questions and teach them from that.

To the question of whether English standards had declined, Andi had to think a little before she answered.

I know that's what they are saying. Standard of English has gone down. No one speaks good English anymore. To an extent it's true. Over the years I do see the standards slipping. We had grammar drills those days, then later it was the communicative syllabus, where only the meaning mattered. As long as the meaning came through you accepted answers. I guess it was to serve the needs of the nation at that point. But I think the rot started from there. Meaning comes through and they award the mark in the exam. But what meaning is there if the grammar is all wrong, the tenses are mixed up,–

Andi says that perhaps the biggest change that she had to go through was the advent of the digital age into education.

When I started teaching everything was manual. We wrote our lesson plans, record books, prepared actual written handouts and if any typing needed to be done we used typewriters. Then the digital age came, the computers. You would have thought that we would be so happy that now all the work would be lessened and so much time would be saved. But you won't believe the resistance from us old teachers. We resisted as long as we could and then we caved in, but luckily, we did. I remember how nervous I felt the first time I held a mouse in my hand and watched the cursor on the monitor. Was it a challenge. Yes. But looking back I think the major part of the challenge was in the mind not in the actual act of it.

The challenges that Andi experienced were both personal and also as part of the collective teaching fraternity. In her beginning years of teaching, she felt inadequate and in her own words felt she was 'playing it by ear' rather than using the right methodology. This affected her confidence but at the same time pushed her on to pursue her formal English teaching qualifications. Challenges also were in the area of having to comply to prescribed curriculum or expectations despite her personal beliefs on what worked best and struggling to find a balance between the two.

The biggest transformation in her own life according to Andi was the 'knowing that she had to be in real life the person she was portraying in front of the classroom.

I realized in the end that in order for my role as a teacher to have any real effect I had to become the role that I was trying to portray. Did I change for the better, I would say yes. Looking back to when I first started teaching, I believe I have really grown as a person, not just in knowing more stuff, which is also true or acquiring more skills but in becoming a better person.

Andi finally retired from the teaching service after 33 years of active service in five different schools. She was offered promotions twice, once as the head of the language panel which she accepted and one more as the senior assistant of student affairs which she rejected.

Maybe it came too late. I had only 3 more years in the service, and I wanted to use them to do what I loved best. Teach English.

4.1.2 Jay

Jay started teaching English in a suburban secondary school after graduating with a bachelor's degree in TESL in 1990. At that time, he had just turned 24.

I was freshly graduated and full of ideas which I couldn't wait to try out in my English classes. All that creative and fun methods. Debates, role plays, it sounded so good during our teacher training and when we were learning all the theories and approaches in the lecture halls. But the reality is something else.

Like Andi, Jay talked about the initial disillusionment he had with the teaching scene. It was only after he had an 'internal reality check' that he felt any real progress with his ESL students.

They were such a mixed group. Different ethnicities, family background, language proficiencies. Typical of a city school. At that time, they streamed students according to their academic performances. So generally, if I had the first class I would use different material, probably even the prescribed texts and I could go a lot further with them with my own additional resources. But with the last class, every sentence was a painstaking effort. Forget about all the prescribed methods. In the end what worked best was using plain translation. Why hunt for a million hazy words to describe something when one word in Tamil or Malay would have explained the meaning of the English word. So much wasted time. But the inspectorates frowned upon it. I was considered a bad teacher if I resorted to using Malay or Tamil in the classroom.

Jay spoke passionately about the changes in language policies over the three decades of his teaching career. He had been teaching for about thirteen years when the ETEMS policy was announced in 2003. He says that he was initially one of the trainers.

There was suddenly such a fluster about English when they changed the medium of instruction for Math and Science into English. I remember having to conduct training sessions for the Math and Science teachers in my district. I was supposed to be the language expert and worked alongside the content expert who was a science teacher fluent in English. I think the results were mixed. Some were real success stories some not so. It all depended on the individual teacher, I think.

Jay recalled the reversal of the policy wryly.

I was not too surprised. Does anything really last in Malaysian education. So, they changed it back to Bahasa Malaysia. To me it was no big deal, but I felt bad for the students. It didn't make sense then but like all policies we just went on.

When asked about the incorporation of the literature component into the English language classroom Jay's tone was a little sceptical.

It is all good for the better classes. You can reasonably achieve the learning outcomes but what about the end classes. Already they are struggling just trying to learn basic sentences and here you are asking them to read a complete novel. At times I wondered what the MOE was thinking, do the people in Curriculum Development ever come to the ground to see what is really going on before they announce policies?

Jay spoke about more stressful experiences where curriculum didn't match the students' actual levels and how difficult it was to balance the expectations of school administrators and actual reality of students' levels. Textbooks had to be adapted and moderated to suit students' levels and new materials needed to be created sometimes.

On the subject of how he had personally grown through the years, he says that it is impossible not to grow. But he ascribes the growth not so much due to the professional development courses he attended but by the actual experiences he faced as a teacher especially with his students.

Looking back, I feel sometimes that I actually learnt more than I taught. Not just teaching English or some literary text. It was working alongside my students experiencing their lives. The many roles you had to play as a teacher, not just as an English teacher. I was at different times their counselor, mediator, disciplinarian, confidante, coach, even entertainer. What to say to a teenager who takes you into his confidence. What not to say. These are the things that have stayed with me.

On the digital age, Jay says he welcomed it as a much-needed part of education because it made processes so much easier and made teaching relevant to the students. He admits seeing teachers struggling with getting used to computers but states that in the end they all adapted even if the paces were different. He also admits that he is glad that he retired just when Covid 19 struck and the lockdown began. Even though he considers himself 'moderately tech-savvy' he could not imagine himself teaching students behind a computer screen.

It is the actual life, the sounds the sights even the smells that make language teaching come alive. It's not just about the content or the tools. But perhaps if I had stayed on longer, I would have different comments.

5. Discussion

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

How do retired Malaysian ESL school teachers describe the evolution of their teaching practices over the course of their careers?

- How would they describe the changes in pedagogical approaches and teaching methodologies and how they have adapted to these changes?

- b) What are the challenges they have encountered during their teaching careers and how did these challenges shape their professional identities

In line with the objectives of the research questions, four main themes were identified from the narrative portraits.

5.1 Evolution of Teaching Practices

The shifting of policies regarding the role of English in the secondary school curriculum was a major theme, and both narratives, to different extents, alluded to the ETEMS policy, which was left without a full circle completion. There also emerged a sense of distrust or scepticism in the narratives towards the changes in the curriculum over the years. There was also a definite similarity in the perceptions towards the dropping standards of English and a feeling of disillusionment on the present state of English language teaching in schools. Running through both narratives was the common theme of adapting to changes in curriculum and expectations of school authorities or education departments by balancing curriculum prescriptions from the MOE with their own experiential knowledge of what worked best in their own individual classrooms for students with diverse competencies. The overall feeling about dropping standards in English proficiency throughout the years was that it was due to medium of instruction changes, which were not compensated for by far-sighted strategies and effective implementation for language teaching.

5.2 Challenges and Shaping of Professional Identities

5.2.1 Confidence and Readiness

Readiness to teach was a theme that emerged in both narratives, and this was also related to confidence levels. While Andi confessed that her confidence level really rose after achieving formal English language teaching qualifications, Jay began with a reasonably good confidence level spurred by his undergraduate TESL years. With Andi, her confidence built up through the experience, but with Jay, his confidence initially dipped when he came face to face with the reality of the situation. This brings into question the level of preparedness that a teacher training programme provides the pre-service teacher when compared against the development through practice and experience, and ties in with Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (Bandura 1982) on how teaching efficacy is positively related to the individual's desire to achieve a goal. (Fives, 2003; Lauermaun & ten Hagen, 2021; Lawrent, 2024; Jaengaksorn et al., 2015).

5.2.2 Expectations of School Leaders

Another common challenge was the need to balance personal teaching goals and the expectations of the school administrators. Reflecting on their own past practices, the participants found many instances where their own better judgement as to what their students really needed had to give way to the expectations of their school leaders and this mostly had to do with test scores and exam performance. In the first decade of their teaching experience despite an initial struggle to resist and teach according to students' levels of abilities or actual competencies, they succumbed to a 'teaching to the test' method when the pressure from the authorities became too hard. However, towards the middle part of their teaching careers they learnt to balance between both and managed to integrate the need to fulfill exam expectations with their own experiential knowledge of what worked best and what students really needed

5.3 Adaptation to Changes

Part of the challenges came with the need to adapt, and this was both external as well as internal. Among the needs to adapt were to the swiftly changing education landscape with changes in the student demographics. Apart from the differences due to generational type characteristics, there were also challenges in having to adapt to students from different backgrounds, settings and language competencies. (Dishon & Gilead, 2021; Granziera et al, 2016, Loughland, 2019).

All narratives also had strong references to the transformations that came with the advent of the digital age. While referring to personal challenges at different levels in getting familiar with digital technology and overcoming mental blocks against the integration of digitalization of different school processes, the consensus was that once the initial nervousness was overcome, they could manage to progress. However, there were also instances of teachers who chose to leave the service earlier rather than stay and take on the challenge (Helen et al, 2007; Henderson & Corry, 2021).

5.4 Shaping of Identities

Although all narratives indicate that their personal graphs may have dipped and risen at different stages in their career, overall, the gradient showed a positive ascent. In all cases the personal growth was attributed to the 'learning they had received from their teaching'. The years of teaching had resulted in providing them with strength of character, fortitude and a pragmatic outlook on life. All participants considered themselves as being more resilient, empathetic, able to make better choices, and very much wiser at the end of their teaching service compared to their early years. (Ma, 2022; Kirk & Wall, 2010).

The narratives also revealed a certain sense of pride in having accumulated the years of experience and having given back to society in their own role as a teacher. There was also a definite feeling of self-recognition as people who had made a difference in the society and as being representatives of a vital work force in society. This sense of belief in their own significance was pronounced in both narratives (Karlsson et al., 2013).

6. Implications

The study has implications across contexts of education and culture. It can provide a deeper understanding to policymakers on the long-term impacts and results of policies related to education and ESL. The lived stories recount the success and failure of policies over a

whole lifetime of teaching service and provide a longitudinal aspect to findings that may not have been possible in other studies. In terms of policies related to curriculum and pedagogical approaches the results imply that a merged approach based on what works best in the ESL classroom should be adopted rather than what has been prescribed. Overall, the narratives also reflect disillusionment with policies and directives that keep changing and this could provide feedback to those in positions of curriculum development and changes. (Heng & Tan, 2006).

In terms of teacher identity and personal professional development, the study shows how ESL teachers identities evolve over the course of time, and this can thus provide information to those in the business of teacher education as well as policy makers on what support systems may be necessary for teachers at different points in their careers. (Cheng, 2021; Sulaiman, 2021; Zhao, 2022). This aspect could be taken into consideration during the development of continuous professional development courses for in-service teachers, which include aspects of lifelong learning, resilience, and adaptation to changes over a lifetime. This can be especially significant when major and sudden transformations occur in the educational landscape, such as the move towards online learning platforms in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. (Herawati et al, 2022; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Vulpe & Pribac, 2021).

The study also reveals to an extent the impact that the Malaysian educational system has had on helping or hindering teacher effectiveness in the classroom. The emerging themes of having to comply with expectations from school and education department leaders, despite doubts due to personal judgment, point towards the need to provide a bigger audience for teachers' voices in policy reforms or curriculum design and development. The need to provide greater autonomy to teachers in the classroom is also another implication of the study. (Huang, 2005; Gülşen & Atay, 2022; Jennings, 2023).

There needs to be more avenues for retired teachers to provide reflections on the evolution of teaching approaches over time, as seen from their perspectives and lived experiences. Their lived experiences could be a strong source of information when future decisions on educational policies need to be made, especially in culturally diverse settings (Muñiz, 2020; Idrus & Sohaid, 2023; Rajendram, 2022). These implications can help policymakers, educators, and researchers understand the complex dynamics within Malaysia's ESL educational landscape and make informed decisions to improve language education.

7. Conclusion

The novel contributions of this paper chiefly revolve around the lifelong narratives presented with unique longitudinal perspectives on the successes and failures of education policies across decades. Cross-contextual insights relevant to educational reform, cultural understanding and policy development in ESL contexts are also provided. Original insight into the dynamic evolution of teacher identity of ESL teachers is also offered, which can inform teacher education and policy planning. The approach also provides depth and complexity to the study and treats teacher narratives as empirical evidence for evaluating educational policies. Among the key insights that have emerged from the study are the need for resilient and adaptive professional development models and the need for greater inclusion of teachers' voices in curriculum and policy decisions.

In summary, the narrative inquiry into the lived experiences of retired Malaysian ESL school teachers reveals that professional identities are molded and developed through the total of their experiences and become enmeshed with their non-professional identities. This continues even after retirement, where their self-identity as a teacher remains at their core being. This underscores Dewey's principle of continuity, which posits that experiences are not merely isolated events but form a continuous stream to shape personal and professional growth. The idea that teacher training is lifelong and career-long also aligns with Dewey's belief in learning and development as ongoing processes.

The social construction of identity, where identity is seen as being shaped through cumulative lived experiences, is also clearly visible in the study through the teachers' narratives, which depict the co-construction of their own identities within the social contexts of their schools, communities, and educational environments. The lens of narrative inquiry is an appropriate approach, grounded in the social constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes the role of collaborative and interpretive meaning making. (Rosenwald & Ochberg 1992; Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021; Villegas et al., 2020) It has further positioned identity as being fluid and constructed through storytelling, thus reinforcing how personal and professional lives become intertwined.

The study also showed a sense of disillusionment with policies that did not work well in real contexts and the need for actions that were based on experiential knowledge rather than on directives from educational authorities. This shared disillusionment also reflects Dewey's advocacy for experiential learning and pragmatism and supports the notion that meaningful learning should stem from learners' real-life experiences and context.

From the narratives, the emerging train of thought on ESL teaching seems to flow towards the need to merge approaches according to students' diverse needs and not necessarily always adhere to prescribed curriculum and policies. This again echoes Dewey's emphasis on reflective practice and democratic education.

At the end of their careers, it is not possible to remove the identity of the profession from the individual, even after they stop teaching. This gives rise to the idea that teacher training is indeed a lifelong or a career-long venture and does not stop after a few years of teacher training.

Apart from addressing the research objectives, the study also points towards the unmined resources in the form of retired teachers' lived experiences. Finally, the narrative inquiry approach employed in this study has allowed deeper exploration of the retired teachers'

experience over their years in service, and this has been presented in the form of narrative portraits based on their individual stories.

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Authors' contributions

M.V.G. contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study. S.A., the corresponding author, was primarily responsible for the revision and writing of the manuscript. S.A.H. oversaw the data collection process. S.S.N. provided a review of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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