

## **TCs in English Language Teaching in L2 setting: A Conceptual Framework**

<sup>1</sup>Norazrina Ag-Ahmad, <sup>2</sup>Ahmad Thamrini Fadzlin Syed Mohamed & <sup>3</sup>Erda Wati Bakar

(<sup>1</sup>[norazrinaagahmad1984@gmail.com](mailto:norazrinaagahmad1984@gmail.com), <sup>2</sup>[thamrini@upnm.edu.my](mailto:thamrini@upnm.edu.my),  
<sup>3</sup>[erdawati@upnm.edu.my](mailto:erdawati@upnm.edu.my))

<sup>1</sup>*Universiti Teknologi MARA Sabah Branch, Kota Kinabalu Campus, 88997, Sabah, Malaysia*

<sup>2,3</sup>*National Defence University of Malaysia, 57000, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

### **Abstract**

A growing body of literature recognises the importance of understanding the English language teachers' journey. However, not much study has been done to explore the aspect of the journey within the second language (L2) setting, as these future teachers are being trained in the local setting where English is not the first language. The Threshold Concepts Framework (TCF) provides a valuable tool to explore how English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers transition and experience identity and ontological shifts throughout their teaching journey in Malaysia. Gaining insights from available literature and past research on threshold concepts (TC) in English language teaching (ELT), this paper proposes a conceptual perspective in understanding the crucial TCs that ESL teachers in Malaysia must master to become good English teachers. During the pre-liminal stage, early-career teachers are anxious as they encounter 'the concepts' and accept the conduct of the 'communities of practice' that might be specific to the L2 setting that is often counter-intuitive to what they have been exposed to during their pre-training period. As a result, these early career teachers might move between old and new understandings as they test their beliefs through a trial-and-error process while reconstructing their knowledge through classroom experiences. As a result of understanding the TCs, successful teachers are more effective in developing their identity as English language teachers and adding to the values they hold about their teaching, their students, and their worldview of the education system. The proposed conceptual framework contributes significantly to research on ELT by demonstrating a new understanding that can be implemented and integrated into L2 teacher training settings. Hence, the study recommends future empirical research to probe further the relationship between these concepts and an in-depth inquiry into the attributes of successful ELT experts in their transformative journey to become effective teachers.

**Keywords:** Threshold Concepts Framework, ESL teachers, teaching journey, liminal, teacher training, transformative journey

## Literature Review

Teaching plays a vital role in achieving Malaysia's educational objectives of enhancing education quality and developing human capital. Consequently, teacher professional development is crucial to improve the teaching profession in the country. The Malaysian government has undertaken initiatives to establish teacher training centres under the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the Ministry of Education (MoE). These centres aim to provide professional development training to instructors through pre-service and in-service programs. The Institutes of Teacher Education (ITE) are specifically designated as centres of excellence to enhance the knowledge, competency, and efficiency of teachers and lecturers in academic and professional domains.

In Malaysia, teacher training programs are offered through two main pathways and institutions. The first is the Institute of Teacher Education (ITE) or *Institut Pendidikan Guru* (IPG), governed by TED. The second pathway consists of four-year Bachelor of Education programs offered by public and private higher education institutions, which have the autonomy to structure their curriculum. In ITE, the diploma program was discontinued and upgraded in 2005, requiring applicants to complete a one-year pre-preparation program followed by a four-year Bachelor of Education program. Additionally, the one-and-a-half-year Post-Graduate Teaching Course provides an alternative for individuals with non-education backgrounds who aspire to pursue a teaching career. In-service teachers with diploma qualifications also have the opportunity to pursue a degree through the in-service teacher degree program introduced in ITE in 2006. The minimum entry requirements for the Bachelor of Education program in ITE include specific academic qualifications from the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), the national examination at the upper secondary level.

In 2013, the Malaysian government launched the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB) with the aim of improving the quality of education in the country. The blueprint encompassed three waves of reforms, focusing on various aspects such as enhancing access to quality education, raising teacher standards through training, revising the curriculum to align with international benchmarks, and promoting language proficiency in Malay and English. Specifically, the Ministry of Education (MoE) has implemented the Professional Upskilling of English Language Teachers (Pro-ELT) program since 2012, in collaboration with the British Council, to enhance English teaching and learning in primary and secondary schools. Despite these efforts, the improvement of English language proficiency among teachers and students have not been encouraging (Goh et al., 2020; Goh & Abdul-Wahab, 2020; Goh & Blake, 2015; Mohamad et al., 2016). As the new decade unfolds, the government faces challenges in producing quality teachers and graduates, prompting initiatives to recruit highly qualified English language teachers and integrate information and communication technology (ICT) in the education system.

While significant research has been conducted on teacher education and development, there is a lack of attention given to understanding the transition experiences of becoming an English teacher. This conceptual paper aims to fill this gap by proposing an alternative theoretical lens to explore and describe the journey and phases that English language teachers must navigate during their transition. Understanding these professional experiences can greatly impact teacher training curricula and the preparation of competent English language teachers in the future. By shedding light on these aspects, this study seeks to contribute valuable insights to the field of teacher education and improve the overall quality of English language teaching in Malaysia.

### **Threshold Concepts**

In recent years, Threshold Concepts (TCs) have gained recognition as a valuable tool for investigating the transformation journey of learners and curriculum design. A threshold concept refers to a transformative way of understanding or viewing something that acts as a gateway to further progress in learning (Meyer & Land, 2006). This paper is guided by the Threshold Concepts theory to gain insights into the processes and changes that English language teachers undergo in their journey of becoming teachers. The objectives of this study are:

- i. to provide a new conceptual explanation of the transformational journey of language teachers; and
- ii. to explore this journey through the lens of the threshold concepts framework.

Previous research on threshold concepts has primarily focused on identifying them in various disciplinary contexts, such as economics, computer science, programming, engineering, biology, languages, post-graduate studies, and military education, across different countries (Land et al., 2008; Orsini-Jones & Jones, 2007; Syed Mohamed et al., 2013, in Land et al., 2016). However, only recently have studies delved into threshold concepts within teacher education (Sandoval-Cruz et al., 2020). Understanding the challenges faced by teachers in making the conceptual leap and becoming experts in English language teaching is crucial. The application of the TCs framework allows for the identification of critical concepts and content that may pose difficulties for language teacher training while being necessary for progress.

Applying the TCs framework helps highlight concepts that are initially challenging or counter-intuitive but essential for successful English language teacher training. When learners grasp threshold concepts, their internal view of the subject matter undergoes transformation. However, this transformation is not automatic and involves embracing initially difficult or counter-intuitive concepts (Carson, 2017; Jan H. F. Meyer & Land, 2005; Perkins, 1999). The identification of TCs can aid in developing pre-service teachers' confidence and understanding of the teacher

education process. Additionally, while some language teachers' beliefs may be based on TCs, it is important to note that not all beliefs are related to TCs (Sandoval-Cruz et al., 2020; Devitt & McKendry, 2014).

Identifying TCs can be challenging, particularly in the social sciences field. TCs are distinct from beliefs and possess specific attributes. Meyer and Land (2003) have identified five key attributes that disciplinary concepts must exhibit to be considered TCs (Refer to Table 1). These attributes serve as criteria for identifying and understanding TCs in the context of language teacher education. By exploring these concepts, this research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on teacher education and enhance the understanding of the transformational journey of English language teachers.

**Table 1: Characteristics of Threshold Concepts**

<b>Transformative</b>	It involves an ontological and a conceptual shift which means once it is understood, it transforms and improves understanding or perception of a particular subject or even world view.
<b>Troublesome</b>	Initially appears troublesome or counter-intuitive when first encountered because it might involve transforming previously held beliefs.
<b>Integrative</b>	It exposes connections between ideas within a subject and results in understanding the relationships between ideas and practices in a field. Once a threshold concept is understood, learners will see the interrelationship of concepts.
<b>Bounded</b>	It constitutes boundaries with other threshold concepts or between disciplinary areas, which means a threshold concept in one discipline might not be the case for another domain.
<b>Irreversible</b>	Once a concept is learned, the concept is unlikely to be forgotten or unlearned only with considerable effort and difficulty.

The existing body of literature has identified and reported interlanguage, effective teacher talk, actual language use, learner autonomy, and grammatical rank scale as threshold concepts in language teacher education (Devitt & McKendry, 2014; Orsini-Jones & Jones, 2007; Sandoval-Cruz et al., 2020; Skinner, 2017). While previous studies on threshold concepts have contributed to the understanding of these concepts in language teacher education (Sandoval-Cruz et al., 2020), there remains a lack of comprehensive data regarding the crucial concepts that contribute to a teacher's development. Additionally, previous studies have not fully depicted the processes and aspects of the journey that language teachers go through before attaining expertise in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT).

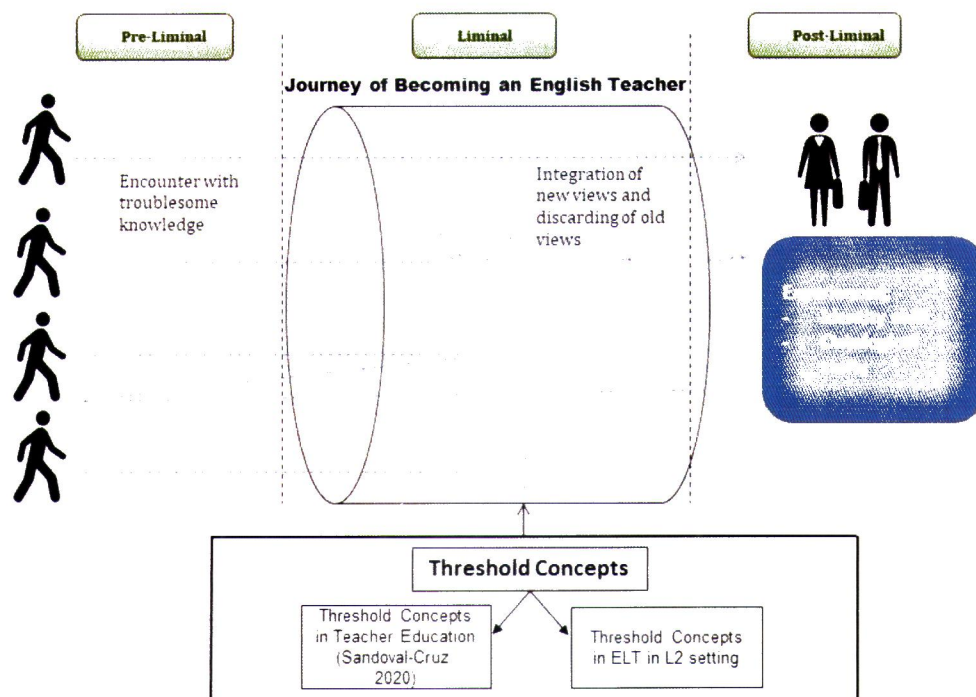
## Findings: Reconceptualising English Teaching Journey

The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 provides an integrative perspective for understanding the journey of becoming an English language teacher. This framework aligns with the notion of varying liminal stages proposed by Meyer and Land (2006, 2008) and is employed to describe the language teacher's journey in this study. The following stages are used to depict this journey:

- A. Pre-liminal stage: At this stage, learners/teachers encounter threshold concepts (TCs) that may be challenging or troublesome. These TCs include interlanguage, effective teacher talk, actual language use, learner autonomy, and grammatical knowledge. Drawing upon the explanations provided by Perkins (2006), Meyer and Land (2005), and Land et al. (2010), learners are presented with counter-intuitive and unfamiliar TCs. Similarly, in ELT context, teachers may exhibit a defensive stance during this phase; unwilling to let go of their established ways of understanding. Additionally, there may be aspects of the English language teaching context, characterized by conceptual complexities and an underlying game, that contribute to teachers feeling anxious about their journey.
- B. Liminal stage: In this stage, individuals navigate between old and new understandings and beliefs. It occurs when understanding begins to resemble mimicry or imitation, and individuals attempt to reconstruct their previous knowledge into new forms. For example, a teacher may encounter difficulties in implementing effective teacher talk in the classroom. They actively experiment with new ideas and approaches to engage students and enhance their comprehension through trial and error. They may revert to their prior methodological knowledge or discard unsuccessful ideas, reconstructing their understanding through classroom experiences. It may take time for them to realize that different students require different approaches to teacher talk. Once they have mastered the TC of effective teacher talk, their perspective on the role of teacher talk in English language teaching (ELT) practices undergoes a transformative shift.
- C. Post-liminal stage: At this stage, transformation occurs as teachers acquire threshold concepts, resulting in changes in identity, values, knowledge, and attitudes. Using the TC of effective teacher talk as an example, when teachers have mastered a repertoire of effective teacher talk through classroom experiences or by sharing best practices with other teachers, their knowledge and attitude towards teaching undergo transformation. They are then able to implement and integrate new understandings. They begin to comprehend what is required to become an effective English language teacher and continually enhance their skills and knowledge through shared experiences and engagement within a community of practice (Wenger & Wenger, 2015). They

develop their identity as language teachers and contribute to the values they hold about their teaching, students, and the education system as a whole.

Understanding threshold concepts often involves experiencing "liminality," a state of partial understanding where individuals may find themselves in "stuck places" (Land et al., 2010). Teacher-learners in this state exhibit a back-and-forth condition, seemingly having mastered a concept but then reverting to a superficial understanding. This in-between stage arises from their attempts to comprehend a concept that can lead to confusion and misconceptions. As a result, they may engage in "mimicry," successfully performing learning tasks without truly internalizing or understanding the underlying purpose of those tasks (Syed Mohamed et al., in Land et al., 2016). In the context of language teaching, it can be argued that without mastery of certain concepts or attributes, teachers cannot effectively fulfil their responsibilities by merely following prescribed methodologies or relying on surface-level learning. Thus, the difference between an effective and a mediocre teacher lies in their grasp of "tacit knowledge" (Kyriacou, 2009; Perkins, 1999).



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of English Language Teacher's Journey**

The process of acquiring threshold concepts has been metaphorically compared to traversing a tunnel, which can be a lengthy and complex journey. During this voyage, individuals may be unaware of the direction or progress they are making (Land et al., 2014). Similarly, in the journey of a language teacher, each individual

undergoes a unique process and progresses at their own pace in becoming a teacher. Some teachers may navigate through the tunnel smoothly and reach expertise within a relatively short period. Others may encounter challenges and spend an extended time in the liminal stage, actively questioning and developing their beliefs and identity before crossing the threshold and attaining a higher level of expertise in English language teaching (ELT). Alternatively, some teachers may experience a cyclical progression, taking steps forward and backward before ultimately making the transition. Unfortunately, in less favourable situations, some teachers may remain entrenched in their old or superficial understanding, failing to cross the threshold and failing to acquire a more profound appreciation or knowledge of the teaching profession.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper has presented a novel perspective on understanding the journey of English language teachers by integrating the concept of threshold concepts with existing knowledge. Through this study, the conceptual foundations of threshold concepts have been explored, offering a more comprehensive and coherent explanation of the transition journey that English language teachers undergo in shaping their identity and professionalism within the teaching profession. By focusing on the language teaching journey, this research contributes to advancing the theoretical understanding of English language teaching. This study highlights a gap in previous threshold concept research, which has primarily overlooked the specific context of the language teaching journey. Rather than rigidly constraining the phenomenon within a fixed framework, the authors argue that English teaching is an organic and continuously evolving process. Various phases and processes shape teachers' development and their worldview within the profession. As emphasized in the proposed conceptual framework, it can be asserted that without mastery of certain concepts or attributes, teachers cannot fulfil their responsibilities effectively by simply following prescribed methodologies. Thus, to further enhance the field, future research should be conducted to identify the essential attributes associated with the development of effective and high-quality English language teachers. This research will play a pivotal role in assisting future teachers in navigating their language teaching journey successfully and ultimately fostering effective teaching practices. Additionally, exploring how these concepts can be integrated into teacher training curricula and professional development courses is crucial.

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