# ARTICLE

# A Narrative Inquiry on the Teachers' Sense of Plausibility of an Experienced Malaysian English Language Teacher

Jayakaran Mukundan[1], Hui Geng[2 ✉] & Vahid Nimehchisalem[1,3]

Teachers' Sense of Plausibility (TSOP) is a state of knowledge of teachers about teaching that develops out of experience. Teachers seem to modify their knowledge of teaching when they are faced with challenges within their own unique work surroundings. The present study investigated the TSOP of one secondary school English Language Teacher, an Expert Teacher with 30 years of classroom teaching experience. This qualitative study is a narrative inquiry. Data was collected through a questionnaire, interviews and field notes. The synergies among the three modes of data collection were evident in their overlap, leading to triangulation. The lead researcher had kept notes from 2014 in the many encounters with the subject while they were on joint teacher appraisals. This helped strengthen evidence from the questionnaire and interviews. Through a timeline, the nature and characteristics of the subject's TSOP across 30 years were first investigated and mapped by the researchers. Subsequently, the subject's TSOP was compared to the five-descriptor TSOP Framework developed for Experienced and Accomplished Educators (EAE). The findings revealed that there were four distinct TSOP phases for this subject. The study also revealed more similarities than differences between this subject and the 20 in the EAE group. This research would benefit the field of Teacher Professional Development (TPD) considerably as it would determine if there are critical, differentiated phases in an educator's TSOP, and if there are common characteristics that determine competence in educators, no matter what level they teach. Methodologically, the investigation and description of 30 years of a teacher's life in terms of evolving TSOP would be considered a major contribution worthy of replication in future studies. Then the comparative nature of this study (academics versus school teachers) provides evidence that accomplished academics and teachers may have a lot more similarities than differences.

[1] Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, Malaysia. [2] Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, China. [3] University of Economics and Human Sciences in Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland. ✉email: huiyuqiankun@gmail.com

## Introduction

The language teaching profession has sometimes attempted a simplification of phenomena like language and the teaching of it and some explorations towards this began as early as in the 1930s. Some believe that aspects of language and the teaching of it are predictable. Patterson's Ten Axioms of Language Learning (1937) was one instance of simplification, an attempt at deriving principles from notions. Then, Teachers' Maxims introduced by Richards (1996) seemed to represent the guidance that teachers depend upon when faced with instructional decisions. He then went on to associate this implicit knowledge that teachers have with some other aspects - practical actions, practitioner knowledge, and personal theories (Richards, 2008).

TSOP or Teachers' Sense of Plausibility, however, is a state of teacher knowledge that evolves out of personal experience. The theoretical grounding was initiated by Prabhu (1987), who claimed that while teachers can be trained in knowledge and skills, their knowledge evolves with experience, and that no matter how much training (pre-service and in-service) they are exposed to, they eventually do a lot of adaptations to that knowledge, thus suggesting teachers develop their own personal theories (Ramani, 1987; Naidu et al., 1992) about teaching-learning within varying contexts.

Prabhu's beliefs regarding TSOP, however, came about as a result of close observations he made, partly on such things as the Activities Method and the efforts of some proactive teachers in Indian classrooms, which he claims, led to reduced dependence on routine and more attention towards responsive teaching (Prabhu, 1990). The initial notion of TSOP and its suggestion that teachers were not passive receivers of knowledge about teaching but rather active innovators in classrooms was then suddenly expanded to include ideas such as Kumaravadivelu's (1994) Post-Method Condition, where he suggested teachers seek alternatives to established Methods. But his critics, including Ur (2013), Swan (2012), and Waters (2012), claimed that while the Post-Method was seen as disassociating itself from the Method, it still contained structures that resembled the Method. Waters (2012, p. 443) described this as its 'second coming', suggesting that it might as well be considered another way of shackling teachers with routine and rigidity.

Late 2019 saw a renewal of interest in the field following the publication of 20 narratives of Experienced and Accomplished Educators (EAE) from across the globe, reflecting on their TSOP in the book *Developing Expertise through Experience* (Maley, 2019). These were accounts of academics who were high-achievers (many were Professors) and leaders (prolific authors and teacher trainers). Mukundan et al. (2020) found distinct similarities in the way these EAE viewed their TSOP in their professional lives. Their study also revealed that many aspects of the practice of these EAE seemed "unconventional", not mainstream.

A major beneficiary of research on TSOP would be the field of Teacher Professional Development (TPD). Gu (2019, p.72) recalls his workshop participant's gratitude and praise for sharing different methodologies during training but then claimed "It does not work with my students". One possible reason for this, Maley (2019) claims, is because the training paradigm (which is algorithmic—and unpredictable—gives teachers X training and which results in Y competencies) was at odds with the plausibility paradigm (which is heuristic—suggesting predictability—whatever training that is provided, teachers adapt when within their unique teaching contexts).

Prabhu's (1987) beliefs of teachers as being not passive receivers of knowledge on teaching, which later led to Maley's (2019) assertion that the plausibility paradigm being heuristic is

predictable opened up possibilities of the identification of characteristics of teachers as they evolved across time, with experience as a variable of study. The concept of the methodology of this study was thus born and it considered the timeline in the evolution. A comparative aspect then was considered, as a previous study on academicians (Mukundan et al., 2020) would compare them with the school teacher subject in this study. The current study focused on a secondary school English language teacher (an Expert Teacher) whose career was almost exclusively dedicated to classroom teaching. School teachers like this represent the majority of educators around the world, and investigating them might fill some important gaps in the literature.

Two Research Questions (RQs) were addressed in this study:

1. How was the timeline of the subject's TSOP defined and what were its characteristics?
2. How does the subject's TSOP compare to that of the 5-descriptor TSOP Framework for Experienced and Accomplished Educators (EAE)?

## Methodology

This is a single-subject narrative inquiry. The main premise of a narrative inquiry is that we make better sense of our lives through narratives (Bruner, 1991). A narrative inquiry is a lived experience, which helps us understand how individuals create meaning in their lives as narratives. The researchers believed that focusing on one participant would be the best way to move forward in this research as the lead researcher had field notes on experiences and observations as early as 2014. This led to a lot of depth in probes which otherwise could not be possible if the researchers were dealing with multiple cases.

**Participant**. A purposive sampling method was used. The candidate selected had to fulfill two conditions: i) had to be a competent teacher and show awareness of TSOP and, ii) could confidently narrate impactful TSOP experiences. Names of candidates who were regarded as competent were provided by state education departments. The candidates were phoned and interviewed by the researchers, after which a score was given to each candidate using a checklist. All the candidates qualified based on criteria (i) and (ii), although not one was aware of the term TSOP. The researchers found out that all of them, while unaware of the term, had active TSOPs, although at varying levels of intensity.

The subject who was selected was a 63-year-old Malaysian schoolteacher, who had an undergraduate degree in Applied Linguistics and a Master's in TESOL from the United States. He was purposively selected from a pool of 25 candidates, all with at least 20 years of teaching experience.

The candidate selected had a distinct advantage over the others—he was still actively involved in teaching after formal retirement (60 is the mandatory retirement age for Malaysian civil servants). After retirement, he taught Spanish, his third language, and conducted Teacher Professional Development (TPD) in schools. He was also in a unique category of teachers—he was promoted to the rank of Expert Teacher, the highest recognition in the public school system for excellence in teaching. He also recalled the most experiences on TSOP (and the most impactful)—although he was initially not aware of the term.

**Instruments**. The first instrument was a questionnaire that had two parts; the first part required the subject to create a timeline describing his TSOP, revealing phases of his professional life that could be differentiated (based on different types of experiences when confronting problems, rationalizing them, and seeking
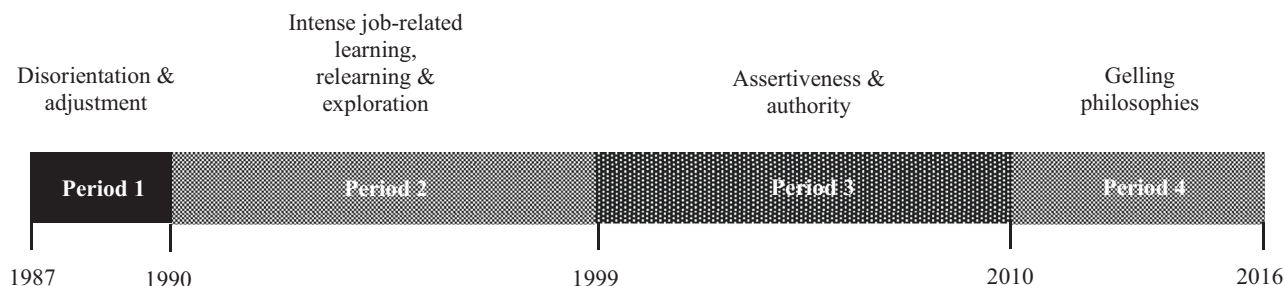
**Fig. 1 Timeline of the Subject's ETP Periods.**

solutions) and elaborating how they differ, something commonly used in research on teacher professional development (Bailey et al., 2001). The second part required the subject to provide a case/episode (within each of the phases in that timeline) where he felt things did not work and how he went about confronting these issues which later made him realign practice to his newer thoughts. The second instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol which was developed to elicit data from the subject which would help triangulate data for both RQs. Data was also retrieved from field notes which the lead researcher had gathered from 2014 to 2016; observing the subject doing teacher appraisals/mentoring sessions and observing him while he was conducting workshops on a language game he had developed. The questionnaire and semi-structured interview protocol were validated by two experienced Professors at UPM, Malaysia, both very familiar with TSOP.

**Data Collection**. Data Collection was primarily done through multi-session interviews, but it began with the dispatch of the questionnaire. The subject was asked to respond within 72 h. Data were also collected via interviews over 10 months (approximately 40 h) commencing September 2019; 15 h face-to-face (September 2019- February 2020) and 25 h via phone (March 2020–December 2020) during the frequently occurring Covid-19 lockdowns. Field notes from the period 2014–2016, written while the lead researcher and subject sat at the back of classrooms observing and assessing teachers were also analyzed. The lead researcher also took notes while listening to the feedback provided by the subject to the teachers who underwent observations and appraisals. Data collection and analysis continued iteratively and recursively until the researchers realized that data saturation had set in.

**Data Analysis**. Data was analyzed using content analysis, inductive thematic analysis, and deductive thematic analysis. The researchers also found the guidelines for approaching narrative analysis by Cortazzi and Jin (2020) helpful in analyzing the data. Content analysis and inductive thematic analysis were used to analyze data for Research Question 1. Data collected for Research Question 2 was analyzed through deductive thematic analysis based on the 5-descriptor TSOP framework for Experienced and Accomplished Educators, EAE (Mukundan et al., 2020). The five descriptors were: (1) Background or history of personal experiences does affect EAE; (2) Key personalities and their philosophies do influence EAE; (3) The use of non-conventional methods and approaches is common among EAE; (4) Humanistic approaches to teaching are characteristic of EAE; 5) Materials-use among EAE is usually not mainstream.

**Findings and Discussion**
**Research Question (RQ) 1: How was the timeline of the subject's TSOP defined and what were its characteristics?** The data

from the questionnaire, the interviews, and field notes were analyzed to respond to RQ 1.

The first instrument was a questionnaire that required the subject to create in Part 1, a timeline for his developing/evolving TSOP, punctuating phases of life which differ (termed Exceptional TSOP Phases, ETP) and elaborating how they differ, a common method used in research in the area of teacher professional development (Bailey et al., 2001). It was anticipated at the start of the research that a timeline could lead to several conclusions, the main ones being; (i) there could be systematic progression within phases, across time observed when mapping TSOP in professional practice, and (ii) there could be significant differences in TSOP characteristics within the different phases identified.

Part 2 required the subject to provide at least one case/episode (for each of the phases of TSOP on the timeline) where things did not work in teaching-learning and how the subject went about confronting these issues and finding solutions, which would then make him realign aspects of practice to new knowledge. After the timeline was created, and Part 2 completed, interviews were conducted where the researchers probed on the Exceptional TSOP Phases (ETP) defined by the subject within the timeline. The subject discussed what happened during these phases and explained how the phases differed from each other. The researchers charted the duration and nature of the subject's TSOP across different phases after conducting content and inductive thematic analyses. This process involved extensive negotiation and renegotiation of the meanings behind the phases with the subject. The timelines were finalized after a few more rounds of probes and negotiations with the subject.

Document analysis involved scrutiny of field notes (gathered 2014–2016, for another research) where the lead researcher accompanied the subject on teacher appraisal school visits and when he was conducting workshops for teachers. Data from field notes helped triangulate data from other sources. Throughout the manuscript, we have used the attributes (interviews, questionnaires, and/or field notes) to highlight the parts or excerpts that come from the three data sources.

The subject's timeline starts in 1987 (School 1), in his first posting, a MARA Junior Science College (MJSC- a school for high achievers) in a rural area in Malaysia. He was then posted to two other MJSCs: School 2 (starting in 2000) and School 3 (starting in 2004). In 2011 he was posted to MARA Headquarters, where he was Head of the English section and was responsible for the planning of curricular-based programs, teacher appraisal, and teacher professional development programs.

The data revealed four distinct periods of ETP as shown in Fig. 1:

According to the timeline (Fig. 1), in the first and the shortest period which lasted for approximately 4 years, the subject experienced a phase of disorientation and adjustment. This was followed by an approximately 9-year period of intense job-related learning, relearning, and exploration. Next, the subject went through a period of assertiveness and authority that lasted

approximately 11 years. Finally, after 24 years of teaching, came the period of gelling philosophies, in which the subject was able to see himself as an emerging teacher-philosopher. Later in this section, these periods will be extensively discussed.

The second part of the questionnaire required the subject to illustrate an important TSOP issue in all four phases above and describe his thought patterns which later led to realignment in practice. These episodes/cases further helped the researchers with confirmation of the phases within the timeline. The subject wrote one episode for each of the four phases, the themes and titles of which were:

Phase 1: Why the CALT (Communicative Approach to Language Teaching) is overrated in SL situations (approximately 455 words)

Phase 2: Freedom helps learners write freely, and better! (approximately 430 words)

Phase 3: Emphasis on listening and speaking in the early years, liberates the SL learner from poor English (approximately 250 words)

Phase 4: I can smell a bad teacher a mile away! (approximately 115 words)

The full episodes are presented in Appendix A.

1. Period of disorientation and adjustment (1987–1990)
   This was the shortest among the four periods (lasting approximately four years), revealed in the 30-year timeline. The subject used a lot of words associated with disorientation in Part 2 of the questionnaire and the interviews. The most common of these were *confused, hesitant, unable to, frustrated, task management was compromised, disaster activity, sick to the core, failed lesson, learner passivity, and burnout*) when describing this period of his professional timeline. Words that he used that were associated with his attempt at adjustment included *needed better judgment, had to seek other ideas, need to rethink/reconsider strategies, need to add/omit some things, need more professional development programs*.

   Data collected from the subject—including Timeline Development (Part 1 of the Questionnaire), Cases/Episodes (Part 2 of the Questionnaire), and interviews—revealed one main issue in his teaching, which was connected to intense TSOP activity during this period:

   The issue: The subject's TSOP initiated a rethink of CALT (Communicative Approach to Language Teaching) as the main method in the English Language classroom. This was emphasized early on in the questionnaire (development of timeline, Part 1, as well as in Part 2 where he elaborated on it in a case, the title of which was "Why the CALT (Communicative Approach to Language Teaching) is overrated in SL situations". He wrote this in approximately 455 words, arguing that researchers like Bahiyah (1990) doubted its workability in SL settings. The Structural Approach has had a lasting influence on teachers and the subject stated that "while the curriculum claimed that it was at present communicative, the textbook and the examinations did not reflect CALT and the emphasis on grammar was glaring" (interviews). As this excerpt shows, what the teacher finds in his search for a security blanket is what may be called a 'Structuralised CALT' or similar misconceived methods that are common during transitions (Criado, 2013). The subject also mentioned that teachers of the English language who lacked confidence using CALT "still hang on to aspects of the Structural Approach, preferring to structure lessons around the PPP (Presentation/Practice/Production) sequence of lesson flow" (questionnaire). PPP (Presentation/Practice/Production) was a way to structure

lessons systematically and it seemed to be appropriate for behavioristic methods (Ellis, 2003), teacher-centric (Willis, 1990), not reflecting learning sequences as established in SLA research (Skehan, 1996), and contrary to humanistic learner-centered methodologies (Brown, 2007). The subject, being a novice teacher during this phase of disorientation and adjustment found PPP to be useful "as a way to structure lessons" within CALT, and "it became part of the ritual upon entering classrooms" (questionnaire). He knew "it wasn't appropriate from the perspective of the actual workings of CALT" (questionnaire) but he "had no idea how lessons should be structured otherwise" (interviews).

It was only after about a year of teaching that he began to remove the PPP sequence within lessons and instead focused on set induction and teacher modeling (usually dialogue or monologue involving a script, as suggested in some methodologies) during the early stage of a lesson. He said that he "created scenarios" (questionnaire) at the practice stage and then guided his students toward production (using a task). This was different from his early days in the profession when the end part of a CALT-inspired lesson was "an excuse to prolong the practice stage via unproductive group work, where students practiced by themselves within their groups without teacher intervention" (interviews). He said, "The emphasis on the task, which comes from Task-Based Learning (TBL) (Willis, 1996), brought more focus to the purpose of natural communication in learning and teaching," and he was finally "able to shrug off, partly, the ghost of structuralism" (questionnaire).

The subject also believed that CALT needed adjustments within SL settings and his TSOP began to echo the sentiments of some researchers like Raqib and Phan (2008) who claimed that CALT was Eurocentric, promoting extreme learner-centeredness, and alienating Asian EFL learners. The subject believed that his TSOP led him to "bring back parts of teacher-centeredness" (interviews) (which his learners preferred) "as they were not used to being not led by the teacher" (questionnaire). The subject's TSOP also led him to "corrective measures" (questionnaire) on CALT. "Time was allocated, towards the end of lessons, for consolidation and reinforcement of the grammatical structures used in the oral communication activity" (interviews). His learners preferred this. Learners also expected teacher intervention a lot more during classroom procedures, so "it was not just the case for facilitation, but rather more intervention" (questionnaire), especially when learners need to be corrected on aspects of language like poor grammar. Sometimes, the subject claimed, "the more proficient learner would highlight a tense error committed by a peer at role play, alert the teacher, and expect him to intervene and correct it!" (interviews). The subject believed that this was at odds with a lot of notions in humanistic ELT trends emerging in the 1980s, where "teachers encourage participation and fluency at the expense of accuracy". In the words of the subject, "while that kind of sacrifice (deliberate ignorance of errors) is honorable seen from the perspective of a humanistic teacher", like him, "someone immersed into humanistic trends while studying in the United States", (interviews), he believes, on retrospection, from his TSOP, that "decisions regarding procedures within methodology are not straightforward and require constant adaptation in differing contexts" (interviews). He claimed that "when the teacher does not correct a learner, news will reach home, and parents start a rebellion" (interviews). This early adaptation of CALT was

considered a significant aspect of his TSOP, especially since he regards this period "as one where the system forced CALT on teachers despite their lack of readiness" (interviews).

The subject claimed that his "enthusiasm towards CALT started weakening sometime after the second year of teaching and various other methodologies like Total Physical Response (TPR) and Suggestopedia were used as well and sometimes lessons simply became eclectic" (questionnaire). He claimed that he wanted "learners to enjoy learning and believed that exam success would come naturally from it" (interviews).

2. Period of intense job-related learning, relearning, and exploration (1991–1999)

This period of approximately nine years was a phase where the subject claimed he was developing his own identity as a teacher. The common words identified in the questionnaire and the interview transcripts for this period were "*relearning, putting an end to the old, moving on, embracing the new feeling and beginning anew, student-teacher rapport, adaptation, invention*". Three things stood out from the data obtained during this period:

i. He claimed that "whatever was written about learning and teaching" and what he had been exposed to in teacher training "was not meant to be cast in stone" (interviews). His TSOP had determined what his priorities were in his professional life. It led him to the belief that student-teacher rapport was of utmost importance in the success of learning-teaching. He started being more relaxed, he says, upon entering class, not getting straight into the lesson but instead warming the class towards the lesson by "chatting with learners" (interviews). Sometimes, "even an event like a learner wanting to excuse himself to go to the toilet resulted in a spontaneous exploration into word families, so the whole class looked at synonyms for the toilet like gents, ladies, washroom, etc." (interviews). The subject said that "an overall feeling of submitting to flow rather than sticking to rigid rules (like the importance of finishing the syllabus) took over" (interviews).

ii. The TSOP of the subject led him to the belief that the teacher is the initiator of production (oral or written) by learners and "the quality of output was dependent on the enthusiasm of the teacher" (interviews). The subject made the most references to the teaching of writing, stating most of the time that "prescriptive classroom teaching of writing was limited to prose modeling, usually preparing students for timed writing like in exams" (interviews) but declared that his TSOP reinforced the belief that fluency "never was associated to modeling but came about from a writing relationship that was forged through journal writing episodes" (interviews). He believed that he developed a reader-writer relationship with all his students and differed in his approach when compared to other teachers—he was reading and responding to learners' writing. A significant statement he made with regards to this is that he had returned from the States just as Elbow's (1973) radical book, *Writing without Teachers* was beginning to influence the field of writing, and while journal writing was already in place long before this movement, teachers in Malaysian schools got learners to keep journals but never responded to writers. The subject, even without knowledge of the developments of the Expressive School in writing (Reid, 1993) was already in serious writing engagement with his young writers. His response to learners' journals gave them an audience, and "they had a real purpose to write" (interviews). His tolerance towards errors made his learners

less conscious of the demands on accuracy. He claimed that as a result, "the quantity of writing and fluency all increased dramatically" (interviews). The subject said he "used the opportunity to stretch the interactions, and do some counseling through these journals, especially when there was a conflict (among the girls it was always to do with a spurned invitation into romance or broken love)" (interviews). He claimed that many of the writers, especially the girls "started writing miles after I responded to their writing!" (interviews).

iii. The TSOP of the subject led him to strengthen the belief that "adaptation, is as important as invention" (interviews). Sometime after 1996, the subject became an inventor—he developed *Grabble*, an adaptation of Scrabble, something that would not have the intimidating effects that Scrabble would have on pre-intermediate level learners. In one class, he wanted learners to create words related to the unit theme, *Friendship*. He removed the board (as there were not enough Scrabble sets in the school) and devised his own vocabulary game, *Grabble*. "Students in groups of five sat on the floor, picked words from the pouch, and as they took turns and placed their tiles on the floor, one by one, someone who had a tile that could form a word associated with friendship immediately placed his tile to form the word and grabbed all the other tiles (that's how *Grabble*, from the word *grab* came about)" (interviews). The subject claimed that his TSOP had led him into transforming a rather elitist game, scrabble, (meant for those with good vocabulary range) to something most learners in his mixed ability (mostly lower-intermediate level) class could play. This came about, the subject said, "from realizing that commercially-developed games cannot help with learning-teaching unless the teacher modifies them for class-use, and for specific needs" (interviews and field notes). He believed that Scrabble (being, traditionally, a co-curricular afternoon activity for proficient learners) could become *Grabble*, enabling it "to feature in group-work vocabulary activity for less proficient learners" (field notes). When the lead researcher sat in during the workshop sessions the subject conducted on *Grabble*, he had in his field notes comments such as "mesmerizingly learner-centered" and "what productive chaos within a vocabulary activity!" (field notes)

3. Period of assertiveness and authority (2000–2010).

The words the subject had commonly used when describing TSOP of the period included "*sacrifice, remake, redo, challenge, new culture, develop a framework, re-orientate, culture change, total immersion, and belief*".

During this period, which took approximately 11 years, he was in two different schools, the first from 2000 to 2003, and the second, from 2004 to 2010. He was also promoted to Expert Teacher, the highest rank for a school teacher. The subject described this period as one where he stood out as an assertive teacher and "one with authority" (interviews). He believed that all schools (like his, the MARA Junior Science Colleges) should break away from the norm and believe that they belong to "advantaged learning situations" (interviews and field notes) where students were excellent academically and excellence in English should come naturally with greater exposure to the language (this he believed was achievable as they were a boarding school and time was on their side). To capitalize on this advantaged situation, his TSOP got him venturing into establishing co-curricular and out-of-class English to complement classroom learning-teaching. This belief, the subject said, was the result of his TSOP beginning to accept

the inevitable—"no amount of classroom teaching can bring about fluency in the Target Language (TL)" (questionnaire, interviews, and field notes). As a result of this, the subject explored the possibilities of increased exposure of students to English through out-of-class campaigns. In 2000, he started SEEDS—School-wide English Enrichment and Development Strategies. Students and teachers sat in circles and read for 10 min. One passage with new words was read each week, on the 1st day of the week. Additional work like the discussion of main ideas and work on vocabulary was done right through to the end of the week. Another thing that made SEEDS quite radically different from the mainstream was that "all official functions were conducted in English" (field notes). Even the lyrics of the school song, he said, were changed to English. In 2004, he started SCOPE (School-wide Communication Program for English); again, this was a reaction to his TSOP, where he had been convinced that oral communication had not been emphasized enough in the early years of English Language learning-teaching. SCOPE allowed teachers in Form 1 (the first level in secondary school) to work extensively on the oral fluency of their thirteen-year-olds. For 5 months (Semester 1), there was absolutely no pressure on these Form 1 kids, and in the words of the subject, "they indulged in drama, quizzes, spelling bee, song and everything most teenaged kids loved" (interviews and field notes). His TSOP made him believe that "emphasis on fluency contributes to success in oral communication which in turn makes the learner proficient in English" (questionnaire).

4. Period of gelling philosophies (2011-mid 2016).

The words the subject had commonly used when describing TSOP of the period included "*philosophies, philosophizing, confidence, rethinking and believing, emphasizing teacher welfare, students-first teacher motives, focusing on personal development, making professional development meaningful, having a sense of duty and having a conscience*".

This period of approximately 6 years, was when the subject got another promotion, this time to Headquarters where he eventually became Deputy Director of MARA Junior Science Colleges. Among his duties were planning national-level projects, teacher appraisal, and Teacher Professional Development. The National Level projects reflected his beliefs in out-of-class English, and he initiated several of these. Teacher Appraisals confirmed some of the beliefs he had when he observed teachers in classrooms. He instinctively "knew teacher competencies" when he entered classrooms and "watched teaching for the first 10 minutes" (field notes, questionnaire, and interviews). The subject sums up on qualities of basic and competent teachers by stating "that basic teachers, even the ones with more than 5 years of experience are more concerned about teaching rather than learners and learning, while the competent ones know how important it is to be relaxed and establish rapport with learners first" (interviews and field notes). This knowledge of basic and competent teachers firmed up his TSOP regarding teaching competencies which then led him in his role as Deputy Director to start a program for uplifting skills for teachers considered basic in terms of teaching competency.

Competent teachers "were provided training as well, but more for personal development" (field notes). One of the projects, Creative Writing, which was more for personal development involved competent teachers writing for publication. During the workshops, teachers were provided input, after which they had support from writing mentors when they wrote their poems and short stories. The writing products were later published. His

words echoed those of Reid (1993) when he claimed "Writing teachers must be writers themselves!" (questionnaire).

**Research Question (RQ) 2: How does the subject's TSOP compare to that of the 5-descriptor TSOP Framework for Experienced and Accomplished Educators (EAE)?** This Research Question aimed to determine to what extent there were similarities or differences in the TSOP of this competent classroom teacher when compared to Experienced and Accomplished Educators (EAE), mostly well-published and well-researched professors. If there were more similarities than differences, several assumptions can be drawn, chief amongst which would be that competent educators at whichever level they teach may have more common characteristics and this may be crucial knowledge in areas like teacher appraisal (especially in the way it is conducted) and TPD.

In response to RQ 2, the subject's TSOP was compared to that of the 5-descriptor TSOP framework for EAE (Mukundan et al., 2020). The 5-descriptor TSOP Framework was developed after analysis of the TSOP of the 20 Experienced and Accomplished Educators (EAE) in their narratives, from which was established the five most common themes (descriptors were then formed from the themes): (1) Background, or history of personal experiences does affect EAE; (2) Key personalities and their philosophies do influence EAE; (3) The use of non-conventional methods and approaches is common among EAE; (4) Humanistic approaches to teaching are characteristic of EAE; (5) Materials-use among EAE is usually not mainstream.

The findings revealed that there were more similarities than differences between this subject and the 20 in the EAE group:

*Descriptor 1: Background or history of personal experiences does affect EAE.* The subject showed many similarities when compared to the EAE in the Mukundan et al. (2020) study. Like Spiro (2019), he felt that there was a lot to learn from good and bad teachers. Fortunately for him, he did well in primary school and won a scholarship to study in a Fully Residential Science school, the medium of instruction there being English. The teacher he considered best was his Biology teacher. None of his English teachers he said, "taught anything" (questionnaire and interviews). They walked into class and "used the textbook a lot and made us practice meaningless grammar drills most of the time" (interviews). Fortunately for him, a lot of the students in the residential school came from affluent homes and spoke English and he benefitted from the environment. He, like Farrell (2019), felt that he would never consider any of his English teachers as models. He believed that despite having uncaring teachers, the intrinsic motivation to learn languages led him to read widely and he was hooked on novels (his secondary school library was well-stocked with teen novels) and says he "furiously read all the Enid Blyton and Jack London books" (interviews). This, he claims, helped him to become proficient in English.

Like many of the 20 EAE in Mukundan et al.'s (2020) study, the subject was also multilingual, having a deep desire to learn many languages. While French evaded him in secondary school (because the teacher who was conducting classes outside school charged a lot), he had the opportunity to study it while at A-level in Singapore. His fascination with languages also led him to join the Spanish Club at the school. While at university in the States, he continued learning Spanish and French, which then became his 3rd and 4th languages, respectively. He said that after retirement he was offered a job to teach Spanish, as a Foreign Language in a school and his repertoire of foreign languages helped him become a better teacher of that language. He believed in "looking at similarities in form between languages, like between the 1st and

target languages, and exploiting it for quick learning strategies". This seemed to be a significant aspect of the TSOP of EAE in the study by Mukundan et al. (2020). Spiro (2019), Mishan (2019), and Farrell (2019), who were multi-lingual, described in detail how they successfully learned so many languages, despite hardships. Spiro (2019, p. 192) vividly described her fascination with languages when she claimed "that being open to one kind of system opened my mind to many", something echoed by the subject in this study. She believed that learning more languages enabled her to look at patterns, similar or differing, and this led to greater awareness of their functions. The subject in this study, likewise, believed that language teachers needed to be multilingual to experience the challenges of foreign language learning. His beliefs with regards to this resemble that of role reversal as suggested by Lowe (1987) where in his experiment, a group of teachers reversed roles and became learners of a foreign language to be more aware of FL learning challenges. The subject stated that "teacher training needs to consider getting teachers of SL to learn even more languages" (questionnaire).

*Descriptor 2: Key personalities and their philosophies do influence EAE.* Descriptor 2 is the only descriptor that vastly differentiates this subject from the 20 EAE in the Mukundan et al.'s (2020) study. The only person he mentioned throughout the time the researchers probed him was Stephen D. Krashen, whom he said made sense to classroom teachers like him, and also because Krashen had "become a phenomenon in second language acquisition lectures while he was at university in the United States" (interviews). The subject says, "The nature of input in classrooms makes a difference between learning and a mere attempt at teaching" (questionnaire and interviews). Besides Krashen, no one else was mentioned. This research has revealed that regular classroom teachers (like the subject in this study) who claim that they have "very little time to read" (interviews) will lack in building experiences that come with reading. In contrast, the 20 narrators in Mukundan et al.'s (2020) study had powerful influences from key personalities in the field, like Michael West (Kuchah, 2019; Bellarmine, 2019), and some from even outside the field like Dewey (Fanselow, 2019) and Laozi, the Chinese Philosopher (Gu, 2019). Perhaps this bit of evidence from Descriptor 2 would be useful to those who initiate and implement Teacher Professional Development (TPD) programs – there must be a plan for teachers to be constantly engaged with developments in the field, therefore they need to be coerced into reading.

*Descriptor 3: The use of non-conventional methods and approaches is common among EAE.* The subject stated that he never forced conversations on learners and never depended on textbook activities to help initiate them. He used visuals as a stimulus, sometimes even humorous situations from sit-coms to start role-play. He used a lot of songs in teaching and believed that songs (as in his own experiences learning new languages) helped a lot in the acceleration of language development. Many (Mishan, 2019; Spiro, 2019; Ferradas, 2019) in the EAE shared similar experiences and explicitly mentioned the power of songs in FL learning. Spiro (2019, p.192) stated that "the feeling of French took her over by stealth" after six weeks in France as she "had absorbed its music". Mishan (2019, p. 113) stated that her TSOP guided her towards the belief that songs must feature in FL learning mainly because "they were so intrinsic a part of L1 learning". The subject in this study stated that he believed he "became proficient in English not because of his teachers but because he was hooked onto serious reading and English songs" (questionnaire). He believed that "the most difficult things on the job, like teaching grammar, can be achieved through songs" (interviews).

*Descriptor 4: Humanistic approaches to teaching are characteristic of EAE.* One interesting thing the subject mentioned was related to his coaching of students in writing. While at university in the States, he had never read the literature on the Expressive School of Writing (as it was fairly new then in the 1970s and 1980s), the members of which, like Elbow (1973) advocated spontaneity, creativity, and integrity through Free-writing. On his return, he discovered that the trend seemed to be catching rapidly. But he says, "While a lot of teachers were jumping onto the bandwagon, not many were actually maximizing the benefit of journals—learners were keeping journals, but teachers were not reading and responding to them" (questionnaire). The subject claimed that he responded to every journal, and stated that reading the journals of his young adult boarding school students made him not just act as an English teacher but as a counselor as well (he believes every teacher must be one)! His humanistic traits as a teacher were similar to those of the majority of EAE, especially concerning errors. Bellarmine (2019) for instance stressed errors being evidence of learning, while many others believed that focus on errors raised affective filters which was bad for learners (Mukundan, 2019; Rixon, 2019; Mishan, 2019; Underhill, 2019). The subject believed if "learners did not commit errors there would be no use for a teacher" (interviews).

*Descriptor 5: Materials use among EAE is usually not mainstream.* The subject shared similarities in TSOP on this (materials-use) with many of the 20 EAE narrators (Underhill, 2019; Papalazarou, 2019; Goh, 2019; Mukundan, 2019; and Kuchah, 2019). The subject rarely used the textbook. Like Underhill (2019), he believed that lessons can "be developed around graded readers" (interviews). He stated that lessons "emerge out of readers, even those on grammar" as he claimed that the "grammar was within the context of learning, incidental, and very contextualized" (interviews).

Asked about his reasons for not using textbooks, he cited the following; (i) they did not appeal—very uninteresting – too many agendas of the state in Malaysian textbooks, themes of which revolve around good citizenship and moral values—he said it was "almost impossible to keep a class of sixteen-year-old learners engaged" (questionnaire); and, (ii) almost every unit was "dense with grammar exercises" (interviews). His TSOP with regards to textbook use, he said, was firmly moving towards "total abandonment, as there were too many weaknesses" (interviews), and teacher intuitions and TSOP have guided him towards that decision, just like so many other educators in the literature who advocate *dogme* classrooms or textbook free zones like Thornbury (2005), and in recent times, Underhill (2019), and Kuchah (2019).

**Implications of the Study.** There were two Research Questions addressed in this study. The first one helped illustrate the timeline of the subject's TSOP across the 30 years of his professional life. Content and inductive thematic analysis confirmed the establishment of a timeline which revealed four distinct phases; (1) Period of disorientation and adjustment (1987–1990), approximately 4 years; (2) Period of intense job-related learning, relearning, and exploration (1991–1999), approximately 9 years; (3) Period of assertiveness and authority (2000–2010), approximately 11 years; and (4) Period of gelling philosophies (2011-mid 2016), approximately 6 years. The four phases revealed movement from uncertainty to clarity, especially that which concerns teacher beliefs and convictions, all of which are associated with TSOP. This would be of interest to developers of TPD when planning for programs for all four phases. Planners would, for example, need to figure out what sort of TPD would be best for

those in the 1ˢᵗ phase (period of disorientation and adjustment). Their goal would be, perhaps, to ensure teachers at this phase can develop coping strategies during the period of disorientation and adjustment.

The second Research Question compared the TSOP of the subject with those in the EAE group (Mukundan et al., 2020). The subject, in terms of TSOP, shared similarities in all, except Descriptor No. 2: Key personalities and their philosophies do influence EAE. He claimed he was only 'impressed with Krashen'. This, the researchers concluded, was deficient when compared to the vast number of influences (some from even outside ELT) that the EAE group was exposed to, in the Mukundan et al. (2020) study. Gu's (2019, p.77) 'non-teaching' stance for instance, is from Laozi, the Taoist philosopher, Fanselow's (2019) thoughts on categories in oral communication came from such diverse fields as Botany and the Dewey Decimal Classification System, while Bellarmine's (2019) numerous challenges teaching in his native India led him into reading among others, books such as *Teaching as Subversive Activity* (Postman & Weingartner, 1969) and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970).

This study revealed the multiple similarities that the regular classroom - Expert Teacher shares with the 20 in the EAE group (academics). The Expert Teacher was multi-lingual like most of the 20 in the EAE group. This probably meant their TSOPs made a difference in the way they approached the teaching of Foreign Languages. They were thrust into enlightening role-reversal scenarios (Lowe, 1987)—where they experienced the challenges and difficulties EFL learners face. Perhaps Teacher Training Programs should seriously consider the learning of one other foreign language as a program requirement.

The subject in this study was as innovative as most in the EAE group of 20. His TSOP enabled him to view some conventional approaches as sometimes limiting. To make vocabulary learning easier for lower-intermediate learners he transformed 'scrabble' into something new, '*grabble*'—the absence of the Scrabble board brought new meaning into the game—it motivated his lower-intermediate learners, and they became engaged in group-work activity. Perhaps school administrators should take note of innovations such as this and encourage teachers to write up on them during TPD programs.

A common thread running throughout this research and that of the study on EAE in Mukundan et al.'s (2020) study was confirmation that none of these teachers condone authoritarian teaching and that they emphasize non-threatening environments for learners. Like the subject in this study, who believed in encouraging fluency in writing through prompts and minimizing censure for language errors, the EAE group was similar. Papalazarou (2019, p.140), for instance, believed in 'creative chaos' which he says is needed for lesson success. Learner-centered teaching was emphasized by the subject in this study, just like those in the EAE group.

This research, like the study on EAE by Mukundan et al. (2020), confirms that regular classroom teachers can hold strong views regarding teaching materials when discussing their TSOP. While most teachers and administrators believe the textbook is here to stay, the TSOP of the teacher in this study and the 20 in the EAE group suggest that teachers must be better prepared for textbook use. The teacher in this study was resistant towards textbooks and shared a lot of similarities with many in the EAE group. He is in agreement with Underhill (2019, p.205) who believes textbooks are "irrelevant" and believes entire lessons can revolve around graded readers.

This study would be an eye-opener for planners involved in the development of Teacher Training Programs. Deviance from established forms of lesson planning and hybridization of established methodologies which seem very common among practitioners must be considered as part of evolving practice among teachers and must be addressed in courses developed for Methodology or Classroom Practice.

Future TPD programs must allow for more teacher voices on how textbooks fall short of expectations and how affirmative action can be taken so that textbooks can be optimally used. TPD needs to reconcile users of textbooks who range from those with total disdain and outright rejection (as shown by the subject in this study) to teachers like Rixon (2019, p.160) who prefer crafting their own materials but are "happy users of an appropriate and well-crafted textbook".

## Conclusion

This research, a single-subject study has shown that there are more similarities than differences between this regular classroom teacher and the 20 EAE (academics) in Mukundan et al.'s (2020) study. While it would be premature to form generalizations from just this study, the findings tentatively suggest that competent educators, whether they are academics or classroom teachers, may share some similarities in their TSOP.

There also appears to be a possible connection between TSOP (Prabhu, 2019) and Action Research (Banegas & Consoli, 2020), as both may be understood to thrive on context. While Action Research has had more prominence as it is already an overt and established research methodology initiated by teachers to "deliberately change, modify and improve" teaching practices (Burns, 2005, p. 60), TSOP, while being covert and fuzzy, also has aspects of Action Research within (deliberately change, modify and improve). Perhaps future research needs to explore these associations further.

TSOP did not seem to be a well-known and established term among the 25 schoolteacher candidates interviewed for selection in this study. Future studies on schoolteachers would possibly be more efficient if a short workshop on TSOP were conducted first to introduce them to the term before conducting the interviews. This would have eliminated time-wasting lengthy explanations of the term.

There are promising prospects of TSOP being investigated at a higher plane. Like in the investigations on the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) – the space between what the learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with guidance, research on TSOP can be viewed as what the teacher knows from formal education and how the teacher as learner improves on practice from the space (Vygotsky, 1978) referred to as a process within experience (Maley, 2019) (the variable in this study).

## Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available in the supplementary material submitted with the manuscript. Specifically, Appendix A: Episodes for the Four Phases contains the relevant qualitative data. Further details can be provided upon reasonable request.

## References

Bahiyah AH (1990) The communicative approach to language teaching in the classroom. Akedemika 36:103–118

Bailey KM, Curtis A, Nunan D (2001) Pursuing professional development. Heinle & Heinle, Boston

Banegas DL, Consoli S (2020) Action research in language education. In: McKinley J, Rose H (eds) The Routledge handbook of research methods in applied linguistics. Abingdon: Routledge, p 176–87

Bellarmine R (2019) The development of my sense of plausibility and its implications. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 15–28

Brown HD (2007) Principles of language learning and teaching. 5th ed. Pearson Education

Bruner J (1991) The narrative construction of reality. Crit. Inq. 18:1–21

Burns A (2005) Action research: an evolving paradigm? Lang. Teach. 38:57–74

Cortazzi M, Jin L (2020) Approaching narrative analysis: 19 questions. In: Delamont S (ed) Handbook of qualitative research in education. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, p 392–408. Available from: https://www.lixianjin.org/book-chapters/approaching-narrative-analysis-with-19-questions/

Criado R (2013) A critical review of the presentation-practice-production model (PPP) in foreign language teaching. In: Monroy R (ed) Homenaje a Francisco Gutiérrez Díez. Murcia: Edit.um, p 97–115

Elbow P (1973) Writing without teachers. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Ellis R (2003) Task-based language learning and teaching. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Fanselow JF (2019) My quest to understand learning and teaching. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 29–38

Farrell TSC (2019) Reflections. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 39–48

Ferradas CM (2019) Dressed in borrowed robes: telling our stories in a foreign language. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 49-58

Freire P (1970) Pedagogy of the oppressed. Continuum Company, New York

Goh CCM (2019) Developing a sense of plausibility in language teaching and teacher education. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 59-68

Gu Y (2019) The more I have, the less confidence I feel about myself as a teacher. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 69-78

Kuchah K (2019) From little steps to giant strides: the story of my professional journey. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 93-103

Kumaravadivelu B (1994) Toward a post-method pedagogy. TESOL Q 28:537–560. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588427

Lowe T (1987) An experiment in role reversal: teachers as language learners. ELT J. 41:89–96

Maley A (ed) (2019) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council

Mishan F (2019) Learning from teaching: a life in ELT. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 113-22

Mukundan J (2019) Some teachers tell stories, some sing – the world of teaching can do with more of both! In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 123–32

Mukundan J, Maley A, Alfehaid A (2020) Teachers sense of plausibility (TSOP) reflected in the narratives of twenty experienced teachers. J. Asia TEFL 17:319–334

Naidu B, Neeraja K, Ramani E, Shivakumar J, Viswanathaet V (1992) Researching heterogeneity: an account of teacher initiated research into language classes. ELT J 46:252–263. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/46.3.252

Papalazarou C (2019) The art of growing. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 133–44

Patterson A (1937) Ten axioms of language learning. Mod. Lang. J. 21:467–474. https://doi.org/10.2307/317194

Postman N, Weingartner C (1969) Teaching as a subversive activity. Dell Publishing Company, New York

Prabhu NS (1987) Second language pedagogy. Oxford University Press, Oxford

Prabhu NS (1990) There is no best method – why? TESOL Q 24:161–176. https://doi.org/10.2307/3586897

Prabhu NS (2019) Foreword: on the value of shared experiences. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 3–7

Ramani E (1987) Theorizing from the classroom. ELT J. 41:3–11. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/41.1.3

Raqib C, Phan LH (2008) Reflecting on Western TESOL training and communicative language teaching: Bangladeshi teachers' voices. Pac. J. Educ. 28:305–316

Reid JM (1993) Teaching ESL writing. Regents/Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs

Richards JC (1996) Teachers' maxims in language teaching. TESOL Q 30:281–296

Richards JC (2008) Second language teacher education today. RELC J. 39:158–177

Rixon S (2019) Lurching into discovery. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 155–66

Skehan P (1996) Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction. In: Willis J, Willis D (eds) Challenge and change in language teaching. London: Heinemann, p 17–30

Spiro J (2019) Found in translation. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 191–200

Swan M (2012) Thinking about language teaching (selected articles 1982–2011). Oxford University Press, Oxford, (ed)

Thornbury S (2005) Dogme: dancing in the dark? Folio 9:3–5

Underhill A (2019) A sense of plausibility. In: Maley A (ed) Developing expertise through experience. London: British Council, p 201–12

Ur P (2013) Language-teaching method revisited. ELT J. 67:468–474

Vygotsky LS (1978) Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes. Edited and translated by Cole M, John-Steiner V, Scribner S, Souberman E. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Waters A (2012) Trends and issues in ELT methods and methodology. ELT J. 66:440–449

Willis D (1990) The lexical syllabus: a new approach to language teaching. Collins COBUILD, London

Willis J (1996) A framework for task-based learning. Longman, London

## Author contributions

Jayakaran Mukundan was primarily responsible for participant recruitment, conducting interviews, data collection, and compiling field notes. He also contributed substantially to the development of the research design and narrative inquiry framework. Hui Geng wrote the Introduction and Literature Review sections and contributed to refining the research questions and framing the study's theoretical context. Vahid Nimehchisalem was responsible for writing the Methodology and Conclusion sections and contributed to the alignment of research design with data analysis procedures. All three authors collaboratively wrote the Findings and Discussion section and participated in data interpretation. They also jointly reviewed and revised the manuscript for intellectual content, clarity, and coherence prior to submission. All authors have approved the final version of the manuscript.

## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Ethical approval

The authors confirm that all research involving human participants was conducted in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations, including the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical review and exemption were granted by the Panel of Experts, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in December 2019. The panel determined that the study—based on an interview with a single individual, Mohd. Amin Din, who is currently retired and unaffiliated with any institution—qualified for exemption from formal institutional ethics approval. The exemption was granted on the grounds that the research posed minimal risk to the participant and fell outside the scope requiring oversight by a formal ethics review board.

## Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained orally from the participant, Mohd. Amin Din, by the first author in December 2019, prior to the commencement of the interview. The participant was fully informed of the purpose and nature of the study, which involved a non-interventional, qualitative interview for academic research purposes only. The decision to obtain oral rather than written consent was based on the informal and minimal-risk nature of the interview and the participant's preference for a conversational setting. Oral consent was audio-recorded with the participant's permission, and a copy of the consent script used has been submitted as part of this manuscript. The participant was explicitly informed that: Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. He could withdraw at any point without consequence. All information collected would be used strictly for research purposes. His identity would remain confidential in all reporting and dissemination of results. The data would be stored securely and used solely by the research team for analysis and publication. The participant confirmed that he understood these conditions and freely agreed to take part in the study.

## Additional information