

Scoping study of English as a subject in basic education (ESBE) in the Philippines

Executive summary

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Writers and researchers:

Psyche Kennet

Edizon A. Fermin

Rona Lynne A. Federizo

www.britishcouncil.ph

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Overview

English as a subject in basic education (ESBE) in the Philippines has undergone significant changes over years of curriculum reform. A bilingual approach to teaching and learning implemented by the then Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS) was in place for over two decades until a mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) approach was institutionalised.

Fifteen years since the shift towards multilingualism in basic education, a number of language-related issues have remained. Their impact on the readiness of basic education learners to access opportunities for further education, and eventually employment, has been a subject of recent public discussions, chiefly enquiring whether Filipinos are already losing their competitive edge in terms of communicative competence in English.

Against this backdrop, the *Scoping study of English as a subject in basic education (ESBE) in the Philippines* was designed and conducted. It aimed to identify English language teaching, learning and educational management needs, and opportunities in the Philippines. Guided by a systems perspective, the study affords a number of recommendations to bring stakeholders together to enhance ESBE in the Philippines.

While the study was designed primarily to provide evidence in support of the implementation of the MATATAG curriculum, which was rolled out in 2024, it was ultimately directed towards realising two national goals. On the one hand, it prepares young citizens to pursue their preferred futures. On the other, it builds a society rooted in equality, diversity and inclusion through education.

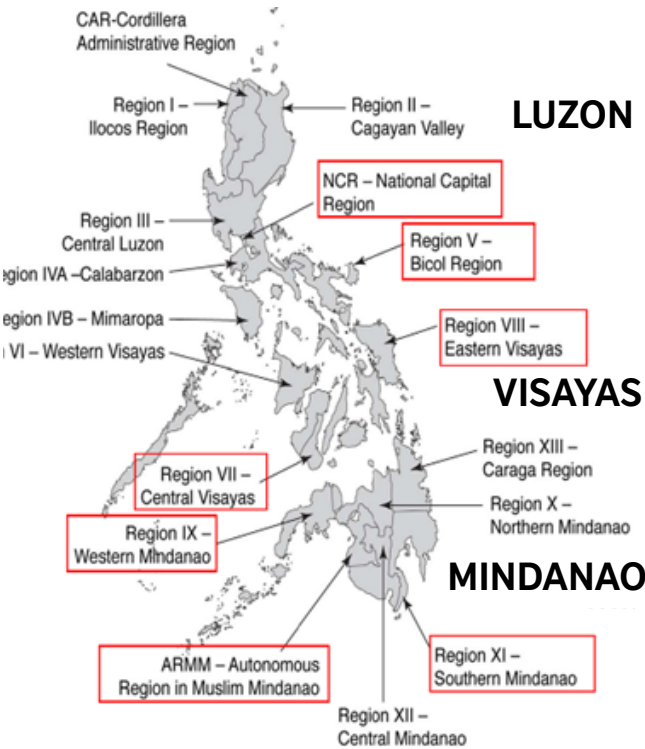
The *Scoping study of English as a subject in basic education (ESBE) in the Philippines* investigates English language teaching, learning and educational management in six administrative regions. It specifically focuses on teaching and learning English in Grades 3, 6 and 10. It is envisaged to support the implementation priorities of the MATATAG curriculum, and ultimately contribute to the national goal of preparing learners as citizens in pursuit of their preferred futures and as champions of equality, diversity and inclusion.

Scope

Six administrative regions were selected on the basis of comparable divergence of disadvantage and learning outcomes. These include number of schools to fund and manage, child poverty rates, school WASH and internet facilities, net enrolment and dropout rates, and achievement in English, literacy and numeracy. Data sets were collected from the Department of Education (DepEd), Philippine Statistical Authority (PSA), and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The selected regions include the National Capital Region (NCR), Bicol Region, Central Visayas Region, Eastern Visayas Region, Davao Region, and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Additionally, these areas were determined based on geographic, socio-economic and linguistic diversity, with one relatively advantaged and one relatively disadvantaged region included from the bigger island groups of Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao, respectively.

From among 18,113 schools in which Grades 3, 6 and 10 are taught, 400 were chosen to constitute a reliable, representative and stratified random sample, particularly for purposes of administering the Aptis for Teachers test and teacher survey. Stratification was implicit and was based on the following categories: 1) school type (public or private); 2) location (urban, partially urban or rural); and 3) curriculum coverage (K-6, K-10 and K-12).



Region	Total number of schools	Number of school for Aptis test and survey
NCR	2466	55
Region V-Bicol	3597	80
Region VII-Eastern Visayas	3855	85
Region VIII-Central Visayas	3691	80
Region XI-Davao	2180	48
BARMM	2324	52
Total:	18113	400

Methodology

The education systems approach played a central role in analysing gaps and opportunities in ESBE which formed the basis of sustainable interventions.

National systems level

At the national systems level, the study optimised the use of key informant interviews, textbook and assessment analyses, pre-service teacher education curriculum review, and analysis of cross-cutting themes of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Areas of analysis and tools and resources at the system level

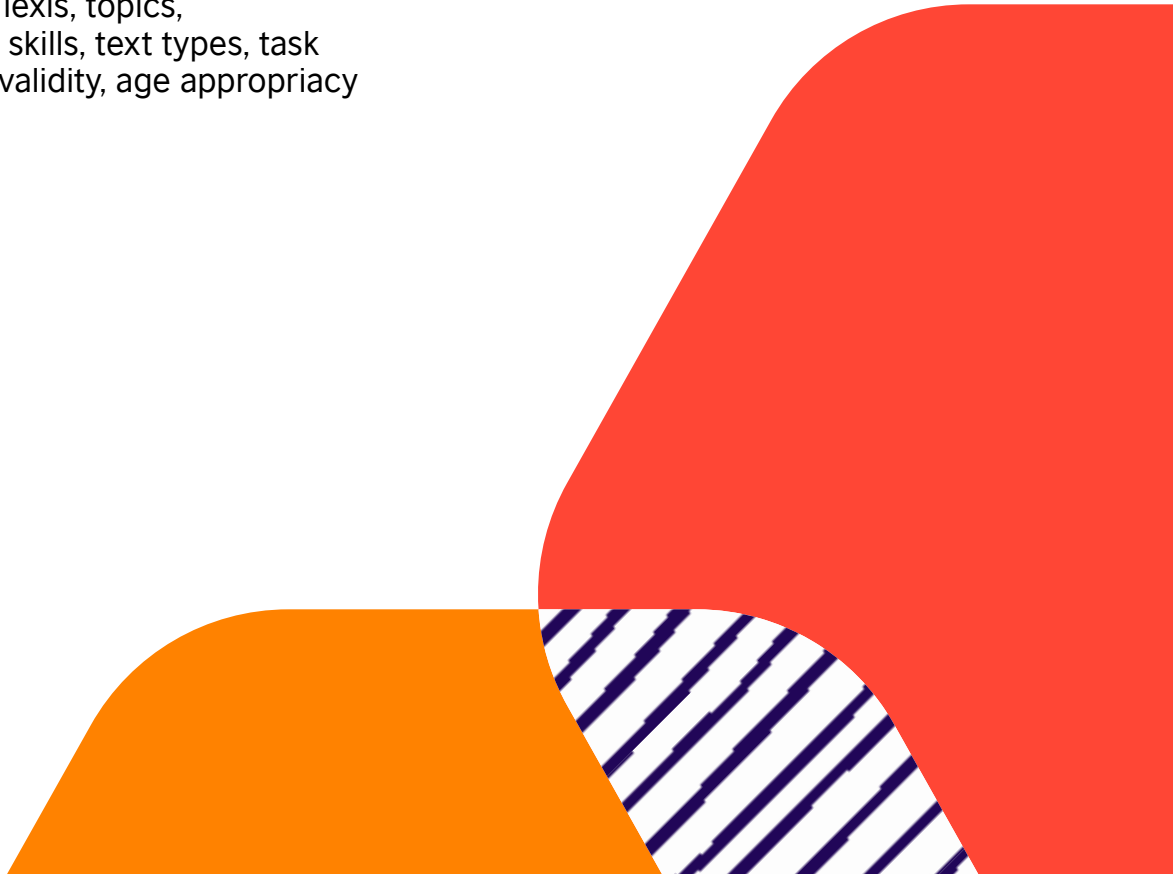
Area of analysis	Tools and resources
Department of Education (DepEd) priorities for English in the ongoing curriculum reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Key informant interviews• Document review• 2023–24 MATATAG curriculum analysis
Suitability, quality and relevance of public and private English textbooks used in basic education and the extent to which they support curriculum reform and teacher capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analysis of Grade 6 textbooks from DepEd and two private publishing houses
Teacher education quality and institutional capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pre-service Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECed), Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) and Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSEd) English curriculum analysis
Equality, diversity and inclusion, in terms of gender, language, ability and geography, in the teaching and learning of ESBE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Socio-economic data from DepEd and the Philippine Statistics Authority Database• Analysis of Grade 6 textbooks from DepEd and two private publishing houses• Grade 6 teacher survey and focus group discussions

The **key informant interviews** from nine key stakeholders provided insights into instructional leadership at the DepEd level, with a focus on how the ‘big ideas’ and streamlined competencies in the new curriculum for English impacted textbook development, pre-service training, MTB-MLE and other aspects of EDI. They also shed light on intended and implemented reforms in the Philippines, with specific reference to the quality, relevance and sustainability of ESBE.

The **textbook analysis** examined the scope and sequence of literacy, language and text in the existing DepEd learning and private publishing houses. It covered specific references to competencies retained in the 2024 curriculum, and the new impetus towards English for content and language integrated learning (CLIL) to support maths, science, digital and 21st-century skills. It evaluated the quality of the materials in terms of learning levels, lexis, topics, communicative skills, text types, task types and task validity, age appropriacy and EDI.

The **pre-service teacher curriculum analysis** included the degree programmes – Bachelor of Early Childhood Education, Bachelor of Elementary Education with a focus on teaching English in the elementary grades, and Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in English. The review of their professional components helped contextualise findings from the classroom observation assessments, the Aptis for Teachers test and the textbook analysis.

The **teacher surveys** triangulated results from all the previously mentioned analyses, while allowing teachers to contribute their own knowledge, experience, approaches and opinions regarding the teaching and learning of ESBE. Meanwhile, **focus group discussions** provided more detail on areas of interest or concern highlighted in the surveys.





School systems level

At the school systems level, the study focused on the administration of the Aptis test to Grade 6 teachers. This four-skill proficiency test also included the teacher surveys with selected follow-up focus group discussions. Meanwhile, a total of 60 classroom observations focused on assessing teaching methodology, with assistance from faculty experts from selected Centers of Development and Excellence in Teacher Education.

The **Aptis for Teachers test** measured proficiency in grammar and vocabulary, reading, writing, listening and speaking. The mean scores were benchmarked according to CEFR levels and standards. While individual results were anonymised to safeguard teachers’ identities, the aggregated results were utilised to generate a picture of teachers’ proficiency in English, and where pre- and in-service language improvement initiatives are needed.

Areas of analysis and tools and resources at the school level

Area of analysis	Tools and resources
Teachers’ current English language proficiency based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)	Aptis test results for Grade 6 teachers from a representative random sample of 400 schools in six selected regions
Teachers’ current proficiency in inclusive, learner-centred, task-based methodology for teaching English as a foreign or second language	Classroom observation assessments from a purposive random sample of 60 schools in six selected regions
Learner engagement, motivation and achievement	Grade 6 teacher surveys Analysis of Grade 6 textbooks from DepEd and two private publishing houses

The **classroom observation assessments** measured teacher competencies with reference to the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST), focusing on teachers’ methodology for lesson planning and staging, classroom management, quality, inclusion, and self-reflection for continuing professional development. The results were used to show the extent to which teachers use participatory, learner-centred, communicative teaching and learning in class, and where gaps in teachers’ repertoire of techniques and approaches can be augmented.

Key findings and recommendations

Curriculum

Key findings

The curriculum analysis revealed that the national government has made significant progress in reducing the number of learning competencies in ESBE. The curriculum adjustments facilitated during the period of school lockdowns led to addressing overlaps and repetitions in both content and competencies. The ensuing Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELCs) eventually further influenced curriculum shaping and the streamlining of curriculum guides for ESBE.

The analysis of the curriculum guides revealed that three overarching issues remain relative to the goal of enhancing Filipino learners' proficiency and competence in English.

These are:

1. weak focus on the primacy of oracy,
2. prioritisation in scope and sequence, and
3. bias towards grammatical awareness.

Undisputed evidence from years of second language acquisition research has shown that oracy is the prerequisite of literacy.

Across key stages, the curriculum guides are heavily oriented towards literacy rather than oracy; there are more literary texts and linguistic forms covered and there is greater emphasis on receptive skills even during the earlier learning stages.

These features pose long-term negative impact on Filipino learners' confidence and competence in using English in a variety of communicative situations.

Recommendations

A set of processes that will lead to further curriculum refinement is thus recommended. This should cover:

1. post-curriculum guide issuance reviews,
2. articulation of a functional transition model for languages of learning,
3. training of Bureau of Learning Resources (BLR) Textbook Development Teams, and
4. reorientation of pre-service teacher education curricula.

While the first two can potentially address the issues pertinent to the necessary balance between receptive and productive language skills, the last two can help teachers employ developmentally appropriate methodologies and interventions.

Textbooks

Key findings

The textbook analysis yielded relevant concerns about aligning these educational resources with international best practices in English language teaching. The report highlights the following key findings:

1. **Language systems and skills:** The textbooks emphasise reading and writing at the expense of listening and speaking skills.
2. **Task types and techniques:** The textbooks are heavily skewed towards lower-order tasks such as recall and recognition.
3. **Critical thinking and higher-order skills:** The textbooks show a lack of understanding and application of critical thinking skills.
4. **Contexts and topics:** The contexts presented in the textbooks are limited and outdated. The primary focus on everyday life scenarios found in typical home, school and community contexts fail to expose learners to more global issues that easily lend themselves to optimising 21st-century skills.
5. **Equality, diversity, and inclusion:** The textbooks show unconscious gender bias, traditional social norms and a lack of positive role models for learners. These features have the potential of shaping undesirable perspectives towards social engagement where communication skills play a vital role.
6. **Grammatical accuracy:** The analysis identified nearly 300 grammatical errors, indicating a lack of rigorous editing and quality control.
7. **Lexical syllabus:** The textbooks do not follow a systematic approach to introducing and recycling high-frequency vocabulary. This reveals that there is a missing lexical syllabus in the design and delivery of language learning experiences.
8. **Consistency and progression:** The textbooks lack consistency in reading complexity, with significant discrepancies in the ease of reading across different modules.

Recommendations

As primary learning resources such as textbooks impact the quality of learning delivery, it is suggested that opportunities to collaborate with global ELT thought leaders in adopting a standardised approach to level-appropriate content creation be explored. This can help address concerns regarding oral fluency, communicative competence, and the inclusion of meaningful, age-appropriate and relevant content. Training opportunities via this route can ensure the application of robust quality control measures in learning resource development.



Pre-service teacher education

Key findings

The Commission on Higher Education (CHED) has responded to the need for revising pre-service teacher education curricula for future teachers of ESBE. Programme standards and guidelines (PSGs) for the degree programmes – Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECEd), Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd) and Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSE) – have been issued to guide teacher education institutions (TEIs). The revision of the PSGs was reported to have been anchored in the declared intended outcomes of the K-12 DepEd curriculum.

The analysis of the curricula of the three degree programmes has revealed that there is less emphasis on teaching and learning English as a second language (ESL); there is greater focus on reading, writing, literature and assessment. Meanwhile, the teaching of vocabulary and productive skills is inadequate, considering the goals of training basic education learners to become communicatively competent in a variety of settings. It must also be noted that for a long time now, the PSGs have promoted the teaching and learning of English literature as a school subject rather than teaching and learning ESL in response to the demands of further education and employment.



Recommendations

Three major recommendations for pre-service teacher education are proposed:

1. Focus on teaching and learning ESL: This is specifically to ensure strengthening the balance between receptive and productive skills. This should be complemented by a real and functional interagency approach to updating the PSGs vis-à-vis the intended learning outcomes of ESBE.
2. A best-practice and evidence-based approach to pre-service teacher education curriculum design and delivery: This can enable future ESBE teachers to be mindful of globally accepted teaching practices.
3. Integration of micro-credentials: These include CertTESOL, CELTA and DELTA in addition to exploring others which can take the place of a number of core specialisation or methodology courses. Such credentials can also help align the competencies and qualifications of ESBE practitioners in the Philippines to global standards.



Teacher English proficiency

Key findings

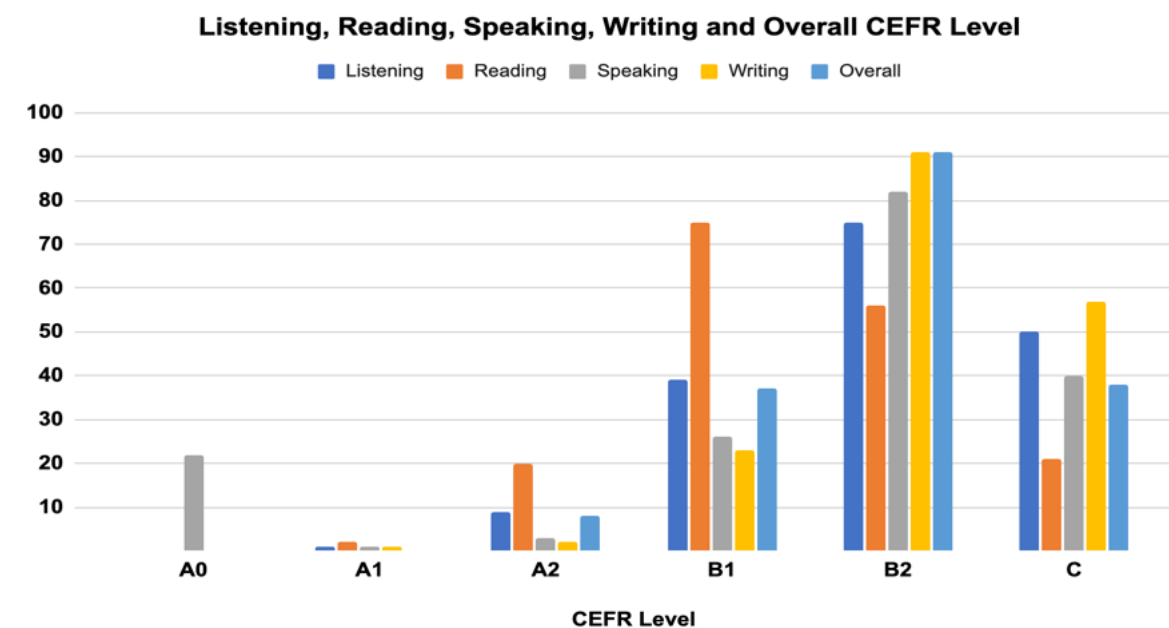
The administration of the Aptis for Teachers test revealed that most teachers are at CEFR B2 level, indicating the proficiency required to teach English at Key Stages 1 (Kindergarten to Grade 3) and 2 (Grades 4–6). About one quarter of teachers are at CEFR C level, meaning that they are proficient in teaching English beyond Key Stages 1 and 2. Most teachers achieved higher CEFR scores for writing, speaking and listening. However, the majority are below CEFR B2 for reading, indicating that more than half can only read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to their fields and interests with satisfactory level of comprehension.

This poses great threat to enhancing the teaching of higher-order thinking skills from text-based learning opportunities, especially those that are within the context of CLIL where exposure to EDI issues can be heightened.

Ultimately, this can negatively impact the capability of teachers to model skills and behaviours supportive of optimal language learning.

While there have been previous attempts to enhance teachers' English proficiency at the in-service level, particularly through the National Educators Academy of the Philippines (NEAP), many of these were not programmatic and sustained.

The fact that entry-level proficiency assessment in hiring teachers is rarely practised, let alone pre-service admission proficiency assessment, teachers do not receive level-specific support. This was also found to be true in terms of the design and delivery of continuing professional development opportunities in the areas of methodology and assessment.



Recommendations

Based on the assessment findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Explore English language proficiency testing for inclusion in pre-service admission processes. This can help in designing more meaningful developmental opportunities for teachers that will lead them towards the effective delivery of ESBE.

2. Incorporate English language testing into in-service training programmes.

3. Include language proficiency assessment in continuing professional development initiatives.
4. Utilise proficiency testing as part of teacher evaluation, particularly in alignment with the career progression framework.

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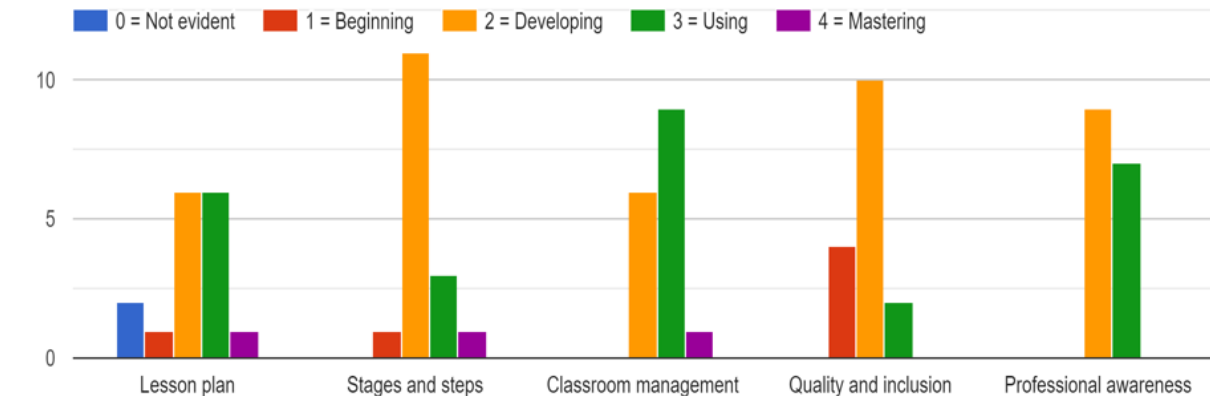


Classroom teaching practice

Key findings

Among this study’s areas of investigation, classroom observations generated the most insightful information concerning the quality and relevance of teaching ESBE in the Philippines, insofar as teaching methodology, as well as learner engagement, motivation and achievement are concerned.

The detailed classroom observation reports highlighted that teachers plan for differentiated learning using appropriate resources to address learner needs, and manage classes as efficiently and effectively as possible. However, it has been noted that there was little evidence of a progression from controlled to less controlled practice or teacher-centred to learner-centred practice.



Teachers are more concerned about teaching than learning but are aware of the need to present less and facilitate more to achieve quality and inclusion. From the teacher survey, it appears that teachers have fairly competent awareness of effective classroom management practices to enhance learner motivation, engagement and achievement. They declared knowledge of learner-centred methodologies as imperative in ensuring active participation of learners.

However, both classroom observation reports and focus group discussions revealed constraints related to learning time disruptions, availability of active learning resources, scaffolding, and learner assessments. Moreover, as articulated during the key informant interviews, in addition to teaching and learning resource disparities, there are also gaps in terms of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities.

The latter is more noticeable in marginalised areas; while teachers in these areas have increasingly become resourceful and adaptive, they could do more if teaching conditions were improved.

Another crucial insight from the observations, survey and focus group discussions is that English language assessment is poorly translated into action. This means that measures of English proficiency and achievement are not systematically designed, administered, disseminated or analysed. As a result, it is difficult to effectively adjust and develop areas such as curriculum, textbooks, classroom methodology or teacher development.

Teacher reflection on learner mastery and the factors affecting it is also affected by the heavy emphasis on covering the textbook/syllabus, and the design and implementation of appropriate interventions are rarely exercised.



Recommendations

In order to improve classroom practice, this study recommends a number of assistive provisions for in-service teachers:

1. CPD opportunities on learner-centred methodology and assessment: This must be designed considering the career stage of teachers as described in the PPST. How those two training priorities translate to better learner motivation, engagement and achievement as evidenced by autonomy, critical thinking, creative problem solving, and fluency in both speaking and writing must be emphasised.
2. CPD opportunities should be localised and contextualised as much as possible at the school level: One way of doing this is to reconfigure learning action cells (LACs) in such a way that teachers are able to articulate more actively their specific classroom practice concerns and resolve them in a safe and enabling community of practitioners. Not only will this increase consciousness of EDI but more importantly, encourage a positive loop of learning design and delivery inputs, processes and outcomes anchored in principles of learner-centredness.
3. There must be a stronger connection between ESBE practitioners in the classroom and language education specialists in TEIs. Assisting classroom teachers to become scholars of their own practice can be facilitated by TEIs. The outcomes of this collaboration can ultimately help TEIs make necessary adjustments in the way pre-service programmes are designed and implemented considering specific contexts. They, in turn, can help shape further investigation of the teaching of ESBE and influence the behaviour and consciousness of language policymakers, learning resource developers, teacher training providers, parents and other relevant stakeholders.



An abstract graphic featuring three large, overlapping organic shapes. The top shape is orange, the bottom-left shape is red, and a semi-circular shape in the middle-left is filled with dark blue diagonal stripes on a white background.

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