Reconceptualising English Language Teacher's Journey through the Lens of Threshold Concepts

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Abstract
This conceptual paper provides an overview of Malaysia's English Language Teaching (ELT) situation and briefly introduces Threshold Concepts in teacher education. This paper is based on the literature review related to the identification of threshold concepts in English language teaching. The study aims to discuss the possibility of adapting the Threshold Concepts framework to understand and charter the language teaching journey, particularly how English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers transition and experience the identity and ontological shifts throughout their teaching career. This study proposes a new conceptual perspective in understanding the ELT journey among ESL teachers, which will be relevant to the teacher training industry to leverage and support the professional development of English language teachers. The study recommends future empirical research to probe further the relationship of these concepts and an in-depth inquiry into the experiences of experts in ELT in their transformational journey to become effective teachers.
Keywords: Conceptual Paper, English Language Teaching, Threshold Concepts, Teacher Education, Language Teaching Journey

Introduction
The new decade has brought about more significant challenges for the nation to produce quality teachers and graduates. Following this, the government aims to produce more qualified teachers, narrow the digital gap, integrate ICT in the teaching and learning process, and improve proficiency and mastery in the English language. At the same time, the

government has initiated a short-term and long-term plan of bringing in more highly qualified English language teachers in the profession. These measures include offering Post-graduate Teaching Courses, accelerating the placements of new English-option teachers and, more recently, appointing interim teachers and introducing One-off Teacher Recruitment in 2021.

These recruitments were initiated to overcome the shortage of English-option teachers in Malaysia. Consequently, these demands raised another question on how well prepared these teachers are in meeting the industry's requirements and expectations. As teachers are directly involved as agents of educational reforms, researchers have shown a growing research interest in the field of teacher education and development. The interest in teacher education or professional development has led many researchers to study the teachers' perceptions of their training, the challenges in their teaching practicum, and their competency as teachers. Research in the field of teacher education indicated that teachers are found to have issues in their competency skills (Goh & Matthews, 2011; Goh & Wong, 2014; Hassan et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2020; Ratnavadivel et al., 2014), transition from pre-service to in-service (Mansor et al., 2019; Omar et al., 2019; Othman & Kiely, 2016; Othman & Mohamad, 2014; Ratnavadivel et al., 2014), professional development (Hassan et al., 2018; Khan & Haseeb, 2017; Madin & Swanto, 2019), and training practices (Goh & Abdul-Wahab, 2020; Hassan et al., 2015; Madin & Swanto, 2019).

Despite the abundance of research pertaining to teacher's training issues; lack of attention was given in exploring and describing the transition experiences of becoming an English teacher. In this conceptual paper, we are suggesting an alternative theoretical lens in understanding the journey and the phases these English language teachers need to navigate in their transition. We believe that knowing what the teachers must go through professionally will have a significant impact not only to the whole teacher-training curricular, but also on delivering apt and well-prepared English language teachers in the future.

Problem Statement and Purpose

The body of literature in teacher education studies have centred on teachers' perceptions of their training (Goh et al., 2020; Goh & Canrinus, 2019), the challenges in their teaching practicum (Goh & Abdul-Wahab, 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Sathappan & Gurusamy, 2019) and their competency as teachers using self-efficacy measures (Clark & Andreasen, 2020; Goh & Wong, 2014; Han et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2020). Most of these studies also concentrated on teachers' ability to carry out the actions required to achieve specified performance goals. However, what is much less documented in teacher education is the transition process of teachers as they move from being pre-service teachers to in-service teachers. This transition is a significant area of inquiry as the early years of teaching are considered the most difficult in a teacher's career (Clark, 2012; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Sözen, 2018).

Given this, Threshold Concepts (TCs) have emerged in recent years as a helpful tool for research into the transformation journey or progress of a learner and curriculum design. A threshold concept can be defined as "...akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress" (Meyer & Land, 2006, p.3). Thus, theories of Threshold Concepts have been widely used to understand what learners have to go through and particular points of difficulty in a curriculum which are key points necessary for progress. For this reason, this work is guided by the Threshold Concepts theory because of its applicability in gaining insights into the

processes and changes that an English language teacher has to go through in becoming a teacher. According to Jaakkola (2020), the purpose of a conceptual paper is to develop logical arguments to explore new relationships or concepts rather than testing them empirically. Hence, the objectives of this paper are;

i.   To offer a new or alternative conceptual explanation of the transformational journey of language teachers.
ii. To explore language teachers' journey of becoming English language teachers through the lens of the threshold concepts framework.

Theoretical Overview: Threshold Concepts

Threshold concepts studies emerged from an academic project called Enhancing Teaching and Learning Environments (ETL) among undergraduates in the United Kingdom. The project is a part of a large-scale project aiming to identify factors that lead to high-quality learning in higher learning institutions through various frameworks. As a result, Meyer and Land (2003) introduced the 'threshold concepts'; a notion which deals with the way learners assimilate new knowledge through reframing their existing knowledge to progress in a particular field or discipline. This transforming quality of threshold concepts means that once a TC is fully understood in all of its depth and complexity, it leads to a new, previously inaccessible understanding of the target phenomena. When learners grasp a threshold concept, their internal view of subject matter or even worldview may be transformed.

Earlier studies into threshold concepts have focused on identifying threshold concepts in various disciplinary contexts such as economics (Ashwin, 2008 in Land et al. 2008), computer science (Zander et al., 2008 in Land et al., 2008), programming and engineering (Flagan & Smith, 2008 in Land et al., 2008), biology (Taylor, 2006 in Land et al., 2008), languages (Orsini-Jones & Jones, 2007), post-graduate studies (Trafford, 2008 in Land et al., 2008) and military education (Syed Mohamed et al., 2013 in Land et al., 2016). The contexts range from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Sweden, Australia, Canada and the United States. Only recently, studies of threshold concepts have looked into teacher education (Sandoval-Cruz et al., 2020).

It is undeniably challenging for teachers to make the conceptual leap and transform to become experts in English language teaching. In order to understand this problem at a deeper level, Threshold Concepts (TCs) have emerged in recent years as valuable means for research into the transformation journey or progress of a learner and curriculum design. A threshold concept can be defined as "…akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress" (Meyer & Land, 2006, p.3). Thus, theories of Threshold Concepts have been widely used to understand what learners have to go through and particular points of difficulty in a curriculum which are key points necessary for progress. When learners grasp a threshold concept, their internal view of subject matter or even worldview may be transformed.

This shift, however, is far from being automatic, and involves the process of embracing a concept that is initially difficult to grasp or counter-intuitive (Carson, 2017; Land et al., 2005; Perkins, 1999). By applying the TCs framework in language teacher education, we are now able to highlight and consider the concepts deemed critical and important in delivering successful English language teacher training. Considering disciplinary content within the threshold concepts criteria in mind can help identify some concepts or content that might be difficult for students to understand and halt their learning but necessary to progress (Land et

al., 2014). In addition, Cove et al (2008), in their studies on the Scottish mentoring programme, concluded that TCs might aid in developing pre-service teachers' confidence in their progress through the teacher education process and its frequently perplexing terminology.

Identifying or discovering TCs is challenging, especially in the social sciences field (Meyer & Land, 2006). In some studies, TCs have been associated with beliefs, but according to Sandoval-Cruz et al (2020), TCs are not beliefs, and not all beliefs are related to TCs. However, some language teachers' beliefs may be based on TCs (Devitt & McKendry, 2014). This claim proves that while some concepts serve as the foundation for a learner's grasp of a topic, TCs have distinct characteristics. Meyer and Land (2003) have identified and presented five key attributes that disciplinary concepts must have to be considered TCs (refer to Table 1).

Nevertheless, scholars have argued that these characteristics are not distinct TCs to be crossed in acquiring a concept. Instead, they are distinguished characteristics that certain disciplinary concepts have and others do not. According to Barradell (2013), TCs researchers have no agreement on which features are required and which are optional for a concept to be designated a threshold concept. However, when deciding whether a disciplinary notion is also a TCs, 'transformative' and 'troublesome' are frequently favoured.

Table 1
Characteristics of Threshold Concepts

Transformative	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.
Troublesome	Initially appears troublesome or counter-intuitive when first encountered because it might involve transforming previously held beliefs.
Integrative	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.
Bounded	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.
Irreversible	Once a concept is learned, the concept is unlikely to be forgotten or unlearned only with considerable effort and difficulty.

The transformation process of worldview may happen swiftly or prolonged over a more extended period, and the transition process in understanding or internalising a particular concept could be troublesome. Having outlined the threshold concepts, it can be described that such concepts can be associated with forms of knowledge that are initially difficult to understand and master but essential for conceptual transformation and progress. This area of study is critical as threshold concepts framework (TCF) can be applied to understand a language learner's journey in becoming a language teacher.

Threshold Concepts in English Language Teacher Education: Reconceptualising the Journey
Threshold concepts is an emerging educational psychology construct connected to the conceptual transformation applied to language teacher education studies. In educational

psychology, conceptual transformation or change is a notion with a long and illustrious history. It refers to a restructuring of existing knowledge representations and a more radical shift in the conceptual system of teachers (Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015). One of the most important goals of TC research is to look at the various concepts that exist in any given subject or study and identify those with specific features that distinguish them as threshold concepts. Sandoval-Cruz (2020) pointed out some considerations about TCs before engaging in TC research:

i.   TCs can only be disciplinary concepts with a long history of being employed within a discipline for proper systematic investigation (Land et al., 2010).

ii.   TCs differ from beliefs in that they are based on scientific exploration in a discipline or area. Although some language teachers' beliefs may be based on TCs, TCs are not beliefs, and not all beliefs are related to TCs (Devitt & McKendry, 2014).

iii. While all TCs are disciplinary concepts, not all disciplinary concepts are TCs (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2006).

The body of literature found that interlanguage, effective teacher talk, actual language use, learner autonomy, and grammatical knowledge have been identified and reported as TCs in language teacher education (Devitt & McKendry, 2014; Orsini-Jones & Jones, 2007; Sandoval-Cruz et al., 2020). Though previous studies on threshold concepts contributed to the discovery of threshold concepts in language teacher education (Sandoval-Cruz et al., 2020), there is a lack of data of which concepts are crucial in developing the teacher. Furthermore, previous studies have yet to illustrate the processes involved or the aspects of the journey that a language teacher transverse before they can rightly don the mantle as an expert in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT).

When understanding a threshold concepts, a person may experience 'liminality', a suspended state of partial understanding, often described as being in 'stuck places' (Land et al., 2010). As students get themselves into this space, they exhibit a 'back-and-forth' condition where they might appear to have mastered a concept, but will then go back to superficial understanding. This in-between juncture is due to the student's attempts to understand a concept that may lead to confusion and troubling misunderstanding. As a result, the student may inhibit 'mimicry'; a state where people might be able to perform learning tasks successfully without really internalising or understanding the transferable purpose of the tasks (Syed Mohamed et al., in Land et al., 2016). For instance, a person may learn about ideas, explanations and formulas to pass a test without developing any fundamental understanding and meaning of the subject matter. In language teaching, we could argue that without mastering certain concepts or attributes, a teacher will not fulfil their responsibilities effectively if they only teach by the book or only by superficially learning the teaching methodologies. Thus, one could imply that an effective teacher differs from a mediocre one in terms of their mastery of 'tacit knowledge' (Kyriacou, 2009; Perkins, 1999).

Perkins (1999) describes five types of troublesome knowledge:

i.   Ritual knowledge – has a routine and meaningless character such as rote memorisation of answers.

ii.   Conceptually difficult knowledge - Knowledge that is conceptually difficult is made up of a mix of misperceptions gleaned from ordinary experiences, reasonable but incorrect assumptions, and the diversity of points of view on the subject.

iii. Inert knowledge – knowledge that we know but not used actively. This happens when learners make no connections to what they have learned.

iv. Foreign/Alien knowledge – Knowledge that comes from a perspective that conflicts with own beliefs and ideologies. This can be caused by lack of knowledge or misconceptions of what is seen (unable to recognise alternative perspectives).

v. Tacit knowledge – knowledge that we rely and act upon but are only incidentally aware or totally unconscious of. For instance, a newcomer may not pick up the subtleties of concepts that are 'common sense' to the experienced members.

The following conceptual framework (Figure 1) offers an integrative view in understanding the journey of becoming an English language teacher. In the first part of the framework, the language teacher's journey is described as different. This idea resonates well with the variations in the liminal stages suggested by Meyer and Land (2006, 2008). These stages are used to describe the language teacher journey in this study:

1. Pre-liminal – at this point, learners/teachers will first encounter the TCs – i.e., interlanguage, effective teacher talk, actual language use, learner autonomy, and grammatical knowledge – that could be 'troublesome'. Based on the explanation provided by Perkins (2006); Land et al (2005); Land et al (2010), learners/teachers are presented with TCs that can be counter-intuitive and alien. Within this context, learners/teachers may hold a defensive stance as they do not wish to change or let go of their customary way of seeing things. Furthermore, there is always a huge possibility that some tacit, ritualised, inert, conceptually tricky, and characterised by an inaccessible 'underlying game' of owning the mantle of being 'an English language teacher in a second language setting in Malaysia' that may put the learners/teachers to be more anxious about their journey.

2. Liminal – During liminality, a person moves between old and new understandings and beliefs. It happens when understanding approximates mimicry or imitation, and people attempt to reconstruct old knowledge into new. For instance, a teacher might face difficulty in practising effective teacher talk in the classroom. They would actively try out new ideas and different approaches in getting the students to participate and understand the lessons and begin to conceive what works and what does not through constant trial and error. They would go back to their previous methodological knowledge about teaching or discard the ideas when they discovered that certain ways did not work; thus, reconstructing their knowledge through their experiences in classroom practices. It might take a long time for them to eventually realise that different students might require different approaches of teacher talk and once they have mastered this TC of effective teacher talk, it changes their views on the role of teacher talk in ELT practices.

3. Post-liminal stage – At this stage, transformation happens when threshold concepts have been acquired, which involves a change in identity, values, knowledge and attitude. Taking the TC of effective teacher talk as an example, when the teacher has mastered the repertoire of effective teacher talk through experiences in the classrooms or by sharing best practices with other teachers, they would be transformed in their knowledge and attitude towards teaching. New understanding can be implemented and integrated. They start to understand what is necessary for them to become an effective English language teacher and continuously develop their

skills and knowledge through shared repertoire and mutual engagement with a community of practice (Wenger & Wenger, 2015). They develop their identity as a language teacher and add on to the values they hold about their own teaching, their students, and their worldview of the education system as a whole.
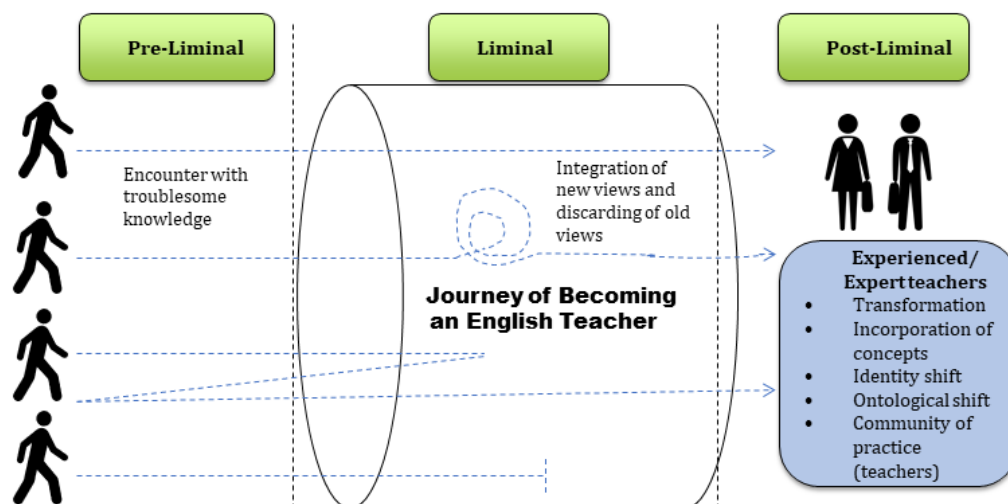

Figure 1. English Language Teacher's Journey

In acquiring threshold concepts, the liminal process has been likened to passing through a tunnel, which can take a long time. For part or all of the voyage, the individual may be unconscious of the direction of the journey and progress (Land et al., 2014). Similarly, in a language teacher's journey, each teacher will go through a different process and pace in becoming a teacher. Some teachers may progress well and reach the end of the tunnel within a shorter time period. Others may struggle in the liminal stage for quite some time, challenging and developing their beliefs and identity before crossing the threshold and becoming more experienced in the field as they integrate a new and deeper understanding of ELT. In other cases, some teachers might need to take a few steps forward and backwards before making the transition. In a more unfavourable scenario, some teachers may remain stuck in the old or superficial understanding, never crossing the threshold and unable to obtain a more profound appreciation or knowledge of the profession.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper seeks to unveil an alternative view of understanding the teaching journey of English language teachers by integrating threshold concepts views and extant knowledge to understand the phenomenon. This paper also explores the conceptual underpinnings of threshold concepts by providing a more comprehensive and coherent explanation of the transition journey of English language teachers in developing their identity and professionalism in the teaching profession. This study aims to enhance the existing theoretical understanding of the ELT journey. It is hoped to address the gap from previous threshold concepts studies that were not focused on understanding the language teaching journey. Rather than explaining the phenomenon in a rigid framework, the authors argue that English teaching is organic and continuously evolving. Some phases or processes shape how the teachers turn out to be and how they develop their worldview in the profession. More research needs to be conducted to explore which elements or concepts are crucial in

developing quality teachers and effective teaching and how these concepts could be integrated into the teacher training curriculum and professional development courses. In addition, a less prominent trend in the literature seeks to balance teachers' and stakeholders' perspectives and voices. Barradell (2013) emphasises the need to have methodological rigour in identifying TCs and recommends further research that incorporates the opinions of professionals in the target discipline (i.e., experts and stakeholders). Hence, further research exploring the language teachers' journey in becoming a teacher should include the voices of stakeholders and experienced or expert teachers as they would see the importance of the transformational process and have experienced the journey themselves. Their input would contribute towards developing a teacher education support system that benefit both teachers and stakeholders alike.

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