

Chapter 8

It's All in the Numbers: Enhancing Technology Use in Urban and Rural Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on teacher professional development and TELL, and the constraints of TELL. More specifically, it explores some of the barriers and enablers to the use of technology in English language classes in six secondary school across Malaysia, in both rural and urban settings. The cross-cultural aspect of the study comes from a comparison of the schools involved and considerations of context-appropriate technological tools and materials in the differing school environments. The backdrop to the study is the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MMoE). One particular issue highlighted in the study is the benefit of communities of teachers working together to implement and integrate technology into their teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Education systems have aims and aspirations to give all their nation's children the best possible education. Within this remit, a commitment to developing technology use to facilitate learning and to provide the knowledge, skills and competencies needed for the 21st century workplace is evident. However, factors such as geography, gender and socio-economic background can present challenges in achieving these aims. Following Kramsch and Hu's (2016) belief that "the link between language and culture in ELT has moved from a view of (national or multinational) speech communities to communities of local practice" (p.40), this chapter explores the use of technology in English language classes in six Malaysian secondary schools, comparing the enablers and barriers to its effective use in the different school environments, urban and rural. Implications and recommendations arising from the findings such as the

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importance of context-appropriate technology and the creation of communities of practice are suggested as possible ways forward for the implementation of technology in English language classrooms within both urban and rural cultures.

Defining Urban and Rural

Defining the terms urban and rural is not straightforward as universal consensus is lacking due to the range of demographic and contextual variables that might be considered when shaping a definition (Hellwege, O'Connor, Nugent, Kunz & Sheridan, 2013). Most people have a general concept of rural and urban as being states in contrast to one another, with population density, land use and socio-economic variables identified as important defining factors. The OECD (2011), focusing primarily on population density, suggests three categories: “predominantly rural”, “intermediate” (formerly ‘significantly rural’) and “predominantly urban” as terms of reference.

In Malaysia, the setting for this study, World Bank statistics for 2016 estimate that 25% of Malaysians currently live in rural areas (The World Bank, 2017). The Department of Official Statistics Malaysia, define an urban area as:

Gazetted areas with their adjoining built-up areas, which had a combined population of 10,000 or more at the time of the Census 2010 or the special development area that can be identified, which at least had a population of 10,000 with at least 60% of population (aged 15 years and above) were involved in non-agricultural activities. (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Official Portal, 2015).

According to Ngah (2010), The Malaysia Rural Master Plan refers to a rural area as: “Areas with population less than 10,000 people having agriculture and natural resources in which its population either clustered, linear or scattered”.

The MMoE divides schools into three categories – “urban”, “rural” and “remote rural”. In this study which focuses on six secondary schools across Malaysia, one school is categorized as urban (School A), four as rural (Schools B-E) and one as remote rural (School F).

In describing the typical characteristics of an urban, rural and remote rural school, teachers within the study, as well as drawing on location and population density as defining characteristics, referred to the availability of resources as significant. For example, Teacher C describes a typical rural school as having “the most basic facilities” whereas a typical urban school has “more advanced and fancy facilities”. Teacher C goes on to describe his school as a “sub-urban school as it is somewhat in between but in terms of location, it would be a rural school as its surrounding is full of green...but facilities wise it's neither too rural nor too urban”. Similarly, Teacher D describes urban schools she has seen as having “more internet access ...the technology or ICT equipment are more equipped, more of it, they have tablets”. Other comments referred to socio-economic background, noting that “the social backgrounds of students are not high. Their parents are not well-off, below the middle-class kind of level” (Teacher B) and also to the make-up of school cohorts: “indigenous students who can't speak any Malay or English” (Teacher E) in defining rural and remote rural schools.

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