

Teacher's Workload and EFL Teaching Quality

by Ardi Marwan (ardirini@yahoo.com), State Polytechnic of Pontianak, Indonesia

This paper presents the findings of a study investigating the influence of teachers' workload on EFL teaching quality. Data were collected from six English teachers working full time at a vocational higher educational institution in Indonesia using semi-structured interview. The findings suggest that teachers' heavy workload could have a negative impact on English teaching quality. Thus, based on these findings, it is recommended that teachers should not be assigned excessive workload. Instead, they should be provided with reasonable workload which would enable them to improve their competence and perform quality teaching.

■ Introduction

The research reported in this paper highlights the findings of a study conducted with six English teachers working full time at an Indonesian public vocational university. It aimed to examine the influence of teachers' workload on their English teaching quality.

The allocation of workload to university teachers in Indonesia has been regulated under the decree of Ministry of Education (MoE) number 3298/D/T/99. The decree states that each teacher is required to teach for no more than 12 hours a week. With this time allocation, it is expected that all the teachers will have the opportunity to prepare for their teaching, assess students' assignments, supervise students' projects and perform research.

Recent research in the area of teachers' teaching has examined how workload can impact teaching (e.g., Dixon, Scott, & Dixon, 2007; Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Knight, 2002; Kyriacou & Chien, 2004; Ng'Eno, 2007). Addressing this issue, in Dixon et al.'s view, is very important because it has long been argued that workload plays a part in determining the quality of teachers' teaching. Many of these studies, however, were concentrated on addressing the issue of workload in the broad sense. That is, they gave little explanation regarding how teachers' workload could have an impact on the quality of the teaching of a certain subject matter.

This study, therefore, sought to fill the gap in research by examining the influence of teachers' workload on the quality of the teaching of a particular subject matter. More specifically, the study was conducted within the context of English language teaching (ELT) in an Indonesian vocational university.

■ Research questions

Two research questions were posed to guide the study. These questions were:

1. How do teachers perceive their current workload as English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers?
2. How does their current workload impact on their English language teaching quality?

■ Review of relevant literature

This section reviews some previous studies addressing the issue of teachers' workload and its impact on teaching. Since there is an under-representation of research addressing the influence of workload on ELT, most literature was drawn from the general teaching or education context.

Dixon, Scott and Dixon (2007) point out that quality teaching often becomes the first casualty when there is a dramatic increase in teachers' workload. For example, due to their heavy workload, teachers are more likely to keep using the same materials which they have used for many years and will feel discouraged to gather new information or resources that are useful for their teaching. Also, rather than using assessment forms which require a lengthy marking process such as academic essay writing and portfolio, teachers will prefer to use other types of assessment (e.g., multiple choice, yes/no questions) which are more time-efficient. The feedback provided to students, Dixon et al. go on to say, is also reduced and therefore, becomes less effective because teachers have not enough time to provide a more comprehensive feedback.

Teachers with less workload tend to have better opportunity to carry out good teaching practices (Ramsden, 2003). They, for instance, can "maintain

frequent contact with students, promote students' cooperation and active learning, provide prompt feedback, and accommodate students' diverse learning styles" (Chickering, 1987, p. 5). These teachers, according to Chickering and Gamson, can be claimed to be sound teachers who have the capacity to create effective learning environment. However, again, all of these can only be achieved provided that their workload is not excessive (Dixon et al., 2007).

■ Method

This study was conducted within the interpretive paradigm and semi-structured interview was employed as the tool for gathering data. The interview protocol containing the list of questions was prepared prior to interviewing the participants. The questions that were asked aimed to reveal the participants' perceptions regarding their workload as English teachers and how their current workload had impacted on their English teaching quality. The interviews were individually conducted, recorded and transcribed. The transcribed data were then subjected to content analysis for identifying the main themes.

The participants of this study were six English teachers currently working full time at an Indonesian vocational university. These teachers were selected from all the English teachers (around 10 people) currently employed in the institution. Contacts using telephone and electronic mails were conducted to recruit all the six participants. All the interview activities took place at the participants' offices.

■ Results

Teachers' current workload

Four teachers participating in this study were assigned 18 to 30 teaching hours a week and two others had only 10 and 12 teaching hours a week. The majority of teachers who taught from 18 to 30 hours a week explained that most of their energy was spent on their teaching responsibility. For example, during the interview, one participant commented:

In this semester, I am responsible for teaching five English classes in which each class is allocated four teaching hours a week. So, in total I have to teach for about 20 hours in a week. Frankly speaking, I spend most of my working time on teaching these classes and undertaking quick preparation prior to teaching these classes. (ET01)

Another participant added:

I think I am assigned too heavy workload. The department where I am teaching asked me to teach for 30 hours a week. To me, it is too much as I lose much of my energy because of it. But, I have no other choice except to take this responsibility. (ET03)

Some of these teachers explained that they were also given other responsibilities in addition to their teaching obligation.

As far as I know I am one of the teachers [among few of us] who is assigned less teaching hours here. Despite my 18 hours teaching responsibility, I still feel hard to perform quality teaching because I am now also responsible for carrying out administrative task as the head of language center. (ET02)

All the teachers here, regardless of the subjects they teach, have the responsibility to supervise students' final projects. One teacher usually works with three to five students in every semester. To me, I usually spend between two to five hours to read students' final projects. (ET04).

The two other teachers of this study who were allocated 10 and 12 teaching hour a week did not find any difficulty with their teaching although they also had other responsibilities including their involvement in the supervision of students' final projects. This is clearly shown in the following comments:

I don't have any problem with my current workload. Indeed, with ten hours of teaching, I still have adequate time to undertake good teaching preparations and provide sufficient feedback for students' learning and projects. I only teach for three or four hours from Mondays to Wednesdays and I usually use my other working time on these days to meet with my students and discuss any issues related to their English learning and projects...Then, I use my working time on Thursdays and Fridays to do other academic related activities. (ET05)

Although assigned as the secretary of the language center in this university, I still can manage my English teaching very well. Twelve hours teaching load is fine to me. In fact, I thank the institution for not assigning me more than this and I am happy for it because I don't have to spend all the energy only on teaching... (ET06)

Time for undertaking research and participating in professional development

The majority of participants who had more than 18 hours teaching time stated that they had very little time to conduct research and take part in professional development activities as most of their time was devoted to teaching and administrative responsibilities. This is clearly stated in the following comments:

...It will be very good if I can produce a research report within one academic year. During my teaching career here, which is almost six years, I only had one opportunity to carry out an action research. With my current workload as a teacher and head of the language center, I find it really hard to perform quality research. (ET02)

As mentioned earlier, most of my time in this institution was used for teaching. It is very difficult for me to allocate time for undertaking research or participating in professional development programs for improving my English teaching ability. So, in

terms of teaching, I only rely on the knowledge and skills which I gained from my undergraduate study. (ET03)

These participants further mentioned that it was unfortunate for them not to be able to frequently engage in research and professional development activities. "Doing research is very important for English teachers because teaching can best be improved if the solutions [to the problems] used in teaching are obtained from empirical research," said one participant (ET01). This was echoed by another participant who argued that:

Research and professional development are two important activities for English teachers. Not only will English teaching be improved through these two activities, teachers will also become sound professionals in the field. (ET02)

Contrasting phenomena could be identified from the participants who possessed normal teaching hours (10 to 12 hours a week) in which they described their current workload as being reasonable because they still had adequate opportunity to do research and participate in professional development activities. For example, one of these participants commented:

As mentioned earlier, I only teach on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays and I use my two other working days to do other academic related activities including research and professional development. I usually use my Thursdays to search for research articles related to ELT and do my own research. I can produce at least one research report in one semester and improve my teaching following the results of the study. On Fridays, I usually undertake collaborative work, sometimes online or face to face, with other English teachers from this institution as well as with those from neighboring institutions. In these collaborative efforts, we often discuss issues related to English teaching and learning, including those that are encountered during our teaching in classrooms (ET05)

Good principles of EFL teaching and teachers' actual teaching

Most of the participants were conscious that language teaching in general and EFL teaching in particular were challenging in that they required teachers to become facilitators who could devote their time and energy to guiding learners to engage actively in their learning. "In order for learners to succeed in their EFL learning, they should take every opportunity to express themselves in the language being learnt" (ET02).

[Also], teachers, particularly those who deal with mixed-ability groups, should engage in active communications and promote good relationships with students. Such communications should not only be undertaken with certain students who require extra attention, but also with all other students in the class. (ET01)

One of the participants further claimed that it was important for EFL teachers to use teaching materials that could arouse students' interest and motivation in English learning. For this reason, they should prepare their teaching well before their teaching schedule. "Such preparation can include collecting authentic materials from the internet and using media such as technology in the classrooms," said this participant (ET04).

Some of these good practices, according to the participants with heavy workload, however, were very difficult to implement owing to their time constraint. For instance, during the interview one of them commented:

I don't think [many of] the English teachers here can develop their teaching well enough because most of us have to consider saving our energy while teaching. So, instead of applying active teaching approaches [e.g., class or small group discussions], due to our heavy workload, most of us use the less active techniques [e.g., excessive written exercises]. (ET03)

This was further added by another participant who taught 20 hours per week:

It is very difficult for me to interact actively with students during the class because I don't want to feel really exhausted when I start teaching another class. Also, I find it hard to provide oral feedback to individual students. So, what actually happened is that I hardly have the chance to address the need of individual students in my EFL teaching. (ET02)

In contrast, their fellow participants who had lighter workload thought that they could apply good teaching principles in their EFL teaching. As they reflected:

I don't have any difficulty at all to identify and gather authentic materials for my EFL classes. In fact, I allocate a special day in a week, which is Thursday, to collect these interesting and useful teaching resources from the World Wide Website. ... Also, I often advise students to make a time if they want to see me to discuss any matters related to their learning. There are also some occasions where students come to my office only to interact in English with me... Honestly speaking, I don't mind. In fact, I feel good about it because it indicates that these students have shown strong interest in learning English and, I think, to a certain degree, in my approaches to teaching as well... In my EFL classes, I often adopt active and interactive teaching approaches such as class or small group discussions and other communicative activities rather than employ the passive ones such as assigning excessive written exercises to students. (ET05)

I guess the majority of students feel comfortable with the way I teach. This is partly due to the fact that I often guide them to communicate in English actively and confidently. Also, in my teaching I consider the smart students as the teaching partners where I often seek their assistance to become the model for their

classmates... I love communicating in English in the classrooms and thus, I always use every opportunity to interact in English with my students. All of these are possible, I think, because I have fine workload so I can organize my teaching quite well. (ET06)

These teachers (ET05 and ET06) further explained that all the good things they applied in their teaching was also as a result of their active participation in the professional development activities including their active interactions with their fellow English teachers from other neighboring institutions. They also admitted that they were more fortunate, in terms of their workload, than some of their fellow teachers and promised to utilize their working time (outside their teaching responsibility) as effectively as possible for improving the quality of their English teaching.

■ Conclusion

Effective English language teaching requires the incorporation of active teaching approaches by teachers. This, however, will be very difficult to be carried out if they are assigned with excessive workload. Heavy workload, as Easthope and Easthope (2000) argue, is eventually a threat to their professionalism. In this regard, they find it difficult to improve their competence, for example through engagement in research and professional development. In contrast, reasonable workload helps teachers make good preparation and adopt active and communicative teaching approaches.

Based on the findings of this study, it is clear that some of the EFL teachers participating in this study, due to

their heavy workload, experienced difficulty in applying good EFL teaching practices (see, for example, Chickering, 1987; Ramsden, 2003). This problem, I would argue, could be an obvious obstacle for them to become effective facilitators for learners in their EFL learning. I would also argue that it would not be possible for teachers to expect their learners to become active users of English in the classrooms considering that they applied passive teaching approaches in their teaching.

In contrast, teachers with lighter workload could implement better teaching practices. This was in part due to the fact that they had the opportunity to improve their competence through their participation in professional development activities and their reflection on their own teaching.

Therefore, it is strongly recommended that teachers' workload be reduced. I would, in this sense, prefer that the institution comply with the MoE's decree regulating that teachers should not be teaching more than 12 hours a week. With their teaching hours of less than or equal to 12 hours, teachers will have enough time to do other academic related activities which are conducive to enhancing the quality of their EFL teaching.

Finally, the issue of workload in EFL teaching and learning context is an emerging issue that needs much attention from researchers. More studies need to be carried out in this area. Further study can be conducted, for instance, to compare English achievement of students who are taught by teachers having excessive workload and those with lighter workload.

REFERENCES

- Chickering, A.W., & Gamson, Z.F. (1987). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education [Electronic Version]. Retrieved 10 February 2008, from <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/7princip.htm>
- Dixon, K., Scott, S., & Dixon, R. (2007). *The impact of increasing workload on academics: Is there time for quality teaching*. Paper presented at the AARE International Educational Research Conference, Fremantle.
- Easthope, C., & Easthope, G. (2000). Intensification, extension and complexity of teachers' workload. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21(1), 43-58.
- Knight, P.T. (2002). *Being a teacher in higher education*. Maidenhead, UK: Society for Research in Higher Education and the Open University Press.
- Kyriacou, C., & Chien, P.Y. (2004). Teacher stress in Taiwanese primary schools. *Journal of Educational Enquiry*, 5(2), 86-104.
- Ng'Eno, G. (2007). Causes of burnout among primary school teachers within Kericho Municipality, Kenya. *Journal of Technology and Education in Nigeria*, 12(2), 9-18.
- Ramsden, P. (2003). *Learning to teach in higher education* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge Falmer.

APPENDIX: Interview questions

- How long have you been teaching English in this institution?
- Do you like your profession as an English teacher?
- Could you please tell me about your teaching load here?
- How many hours do you teach in a week?
- How do you feel about your teaching load?
- Do you have other responsibilities other than teaching English to students? Please explain!
- Do you think your current workload has an impact on your English teaching?
- How is it impacted?
- Do you think English teaching is more challenging than the teaching of other subjects? Please explain your answer!
- Do you have the opportunity to undertake other academic related activities despite your current workload? If no, why? If yes, please explain what activities you do, how you do them and why?
- Please explain how you perform your English teaching here! (e.g., what teaching approaches do you usually use?, how does your workload affect your teaching?, etc)
- What are your expectations with regard to your workload as an English teacher here?
- Do you have any other comments that you would like to say with regard to your English teaching and workload?