A Tale of English Polytechnic Lecturers' Decision Making

Suhaily Abdullah
Jabatan Pengajian Am, Politeknik Sultan Azlan Shah, Perak, Malaysia
suhaily.abdullah@gmail.com

Dr. Faizah Abd Majid
Fakulti Pendidikan, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor, Malaysia
faiza404@salam.edu.my

Abstract

Teacher decision making involves a selection of options that leads to thinking processes, underlying teaching in language classroom contexts. Due to this, as a small part of an on-going postgraduate research, this exploratory case study shares the initial findings on the lecturers' decision-making effects on their classroom orientation. Four lecturers in a local polytechnic were purposively selected as research participants. The primary data was collected through non-participatory classroom observations. Manual constant comparative analysis across the cases was run to obtain the results. Later, the results were triangulated with the responses from informal semi-structured interviews and reflective journal entries. The qualitative analysis revealed that participants did share a similar teaching pattern, i.e. active teaching. The participants employed learner-focused-orientation approach as their common teaching practice. They worked on their planning decisions as well as their interactive decisions in order to harmonize their teachings to students' response, proficiency, and attitude. This finding informs some instructional concerns regarding language teaching and learning process in polytechnics' context (as a Technical and Vocational Education and Training, or TVET, higher education institution in Malaysia) to other English educators in different types and levels of learning institutions.

Keywords: decision making, language teaching, TVET institution, polytechnic lecturers

A. Introduction

The recent fact that English is one of the most powerful communication tools worldwide appears as a vibrant cause to trigger more questions to be asked in English language teaching (ELT). English status in 'the expanding circle', which refers to state of people learn English as an additional language to interact in multilingual contexts (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), is very important due to its direct contribution to the changes in global sociocultural status, technology breakthroughs, and industrial innovations. Woods (1997) suggested that the defining feature of the modern field of language teaching is its cross-disciplinary nature. This feature unlocks cross-disciplinary exploration. Hence, the exploration has been moved from conventional focus such as linguistics and psychology to other related focus like cognitive science (Woods, 1997). In regards to this, the explorations on teacher cognition (see Borg, 2003; S. Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Han & Song, 2011a; Lavigne, 2014; Richards & Lockhart, 1996) that question what language teachers think, know, believe and do, has established significant contributions on the research agenda in the field of language teaching (Borg, 2003) which is closely related to another focused topics such as reflective language teaching practice (e.g. Md Harun & Suravi Al-Amin, 2013) and teachers' belief (e.g. S Borg, 2011; Han & Song, 2011a; Nurusus, 2015; Suhaily & Faizah, 2013; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). As a result, the exploration on more specific language teaching scope such as teacher decision making (as a small section in Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 2001; Barnett, 2011; S. Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Gutierrez, 2004; Lavigne, 2014; Woods, 1997) has become one of familiar topics in language teaching research. Drawing on the same ideas associated with teacher decision making, this study intends to provide initial findings of English lecturers' decision-making effects on their ELT classroom orientation. It is expected that the findings could be drafted into instructional concerns regarding language teaching and learning process in polytechnic's context, as a less explored research population setting in Malaysia, to other English educators in different types or levels of learning institutions.

B. Literature Review

According to Richards (2008), becoming an English language teacher means becoming part of a world-wide community of professionals with shared goals, values, discourse, and practices but one with a self-critical view of its own practices and a commitment to a transformative approach to its own role. Farrell & Bennis (2013) emphasize the importance of exploring language teachers' beliefs and corresponding classroom practices in order to understand the justifications of their actions. This is because teaching involves a thoughtful process. Hence, teachers must be alerted, aware of, and conscious in determining the actions that they intend to take. In addition, teachers must consider the impacts of their plan and practice towards the learning process of the students in delivering their teachings. It is closely related to the fact that language teaching and learning requires an interaction (Bailey et al., 2001; Woods, 1997) between the concerns on what will be delivered and how it is delivered, with what will be acquired and how it is acquired. In other words, teachers make important decisions regarding the kind of instruction they employ in classrooms as well as policies and procedures they need to enact (Richards, 2008; Woods, 1997). In regards to this, they preach the lesson in a way that they believe in (Nurusus, 2015). In addition, their

decisions are influenced by their culturally competency that is shaped by their social-circle environment (Barnett, 2011). As a result, a distinctive teaching practice is formed from one language teacher to another teacher.

1. Teacher decision making

Decision making is one of the considered elements in exploring the reflective teaching in second language classroom (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). By recognizing the thought-in-action links (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), we would understand the rationalization behind all the decisions taken by the language teachers. Teacher decision making involves the selection of options that leads to thinking processes underlying teaching in any classroom contexts. These thinking processes have been influenced by many other variables for examples teacher language learning experience (Ellis, 2006), teachers' cognition (Han & Song, 2011a), teachers' practical knowledge (Richards, 2010), teachers' reflective practice (Harun & Al-Amin, 2013), student diversity (Woods, 1997) and teacher belief (S. Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). The merging of these variables is displayed in the teachers' exhibited actions in their language classroom sessions (Nurusus, 2015). These actions artistically determine what kind of language classroom orientation teachers would employ. It would visibly be different from one teacher to another due to the fact that language teaching is a complex process (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). It is a complex process because;

> *…when language teaching in particular is in focus, the complexity is even greater, shaped by teachers' views of the nature of language, of language teaching and learning in general, and by their knowledge of the particular sociocultural setting in which the teaching and learning takes place… (by Adamson cited in* (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

Not forgetting, language teachers must be mindful towards their own practice. Their awareness shapes each decision they take in matching the syllabi requirement and students' need. This package determines the success of a lesson. Knowing what is required and what is supposed to be delivered plus how to deliver definitely produce an effective impact in students' learning. Hence, it is not a doubt that decision making is viewed as an essential teaching competency (Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

Furthermore, it is best to say that language teachers' preach is commonly based on two folds. The first one can be summarized as 'there is no single best method' or 'one size does not fit all'. In other words, one single feasible plan does not applicable to learners in different classes. It is because the complex moral topography of the classroom does not allow the straightforward decisions made by teachers but always at some level invite a clash of values (Johnston, 2003). As a result, language teachers tend to produce a range of teaching plans in which come in handy when they need it. Meanwhile, the second fold refers to the state where teachers' decision is applicable to a very specific condition. It is derived from the response of an individual teacher and his or her students in which there may be a particular method that they are drawn to – which it is not likely to be a decision a teacher reaches once and for all (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). This analysis is might, as well, related to the practice of *principled eclecticism* (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011)*, faculty belief* (Hora, 2012) and

event cycle (Woods, 1997) that internally and externally shape the language teachers' beliefs in forming teachers' own selection of teaching choices.

2. Types of teacher decision making in language teaching

Basically, making plans are part of teaching management. At the planning stage, teachers must be sure of what kind of options they have made in order to execute their lessons. The options which they have selected is known as a decision and, normally, it is an individual-oriented choice (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Teacher decision making can be explored and understood in three different contexts, of time, as suggested by Richards & Lockhart (1996). Their guides are specifically applied to reflective teaching in second language classrooms. It includes three levels of decision making; 1)Planning decision; 2)Interactive decision; 3)Evaluative decision. A simple summary of each level is stated in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of Decision Making Types

Types of Decision Making	Characteristics
Planning decision	- Before a lesson is taught (when?) - It is a systematic preparation to line out a lesson based on instructional objectives - The concerns involved are aim, activities, aids, anticipated difficulties and general view of the lesson
Interactive decision	- During a lesson is being taught (when?) - It is an on-the-spot decision based on the unexpected things of different aspects of the lesson happened - A 'real-time' solution to generate or enhance the process of teaching and learning
Evaluative decision	- After a lesson has been taught (when?) - It is a result of teachers' self-evaluation on their teaching practice effectiveness (e.g. from previous encounters with the students, failure of lesson plan etc) - The results are derived from list of questions regarding the lesson preparation and lesson execution where by they are interconnected with planning decision and interactive decision

These three levels of teacher decision making is related to the concepts of *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action* by Schon, a renowned name in reflective practice. Planning and evaluative decision are the kinds of selection made before and after the lessons are delivered. They are systematic in nature. This embraces the concept of *reflection-on-action*. Schon's *reflection-on-action* refers to the state of 'ordered, deliberate, and systematic application of logic to a problem in order to restore it' (Russell & Munby, in

Bailey et al., 2001). It normally involves a proper planning, preparation and follow-up. It is meant to line out the list of teaching-related-matter selection based on instructional objectives and results of self-assessment towards own teaching among the teachers. These levels of decision making are considered as a familiar act of teachers (Bailey et al., 2001). This is because teaching is an intricate design of event teaching structure (Woods, 1997). It is within the capability of the teachers to control it and any decisions in planning basically resonates teacher cognition (Borg, 2003; Gutierrez, 2004; Richards, 2008).

On the other hand, *reflection-in-action* deals with unexpected events that require impromptu solution from the teachers. It happens spontanuoesly in response to what is happening at the moment. It could possibly occur very quickly as teachers are teaching. This is also considered as an episode of their responses to unplanned events. The unplanned event could be defined from students' attitude or response (Suhaily & Faizah, 2013), technology failure or adhoc institutional tasks (Hora, 2012). Thus, teachers' competency are very much needed and are required in making the on-line decision about which course of action to take from a range of alternatives that are available (Richards, 2010). As emphasized by Bailey et al. (2001):

> *'Not all of the teaching and learning that occurs in classrooms happens according to our lesson plans, and certainly not everything we plan gets taught. To take this logic one step further, not everything we teach gets learned. This is partly because language teaching and learning are interactive: In order to be effective we must be able to respond unexpected questions, to students' errors, to learning opportunities that arise'.*

Clearly, the characteristics of interactive decision which was stated by Richards & Lockhart (1996) employ the same nature of *reflection-in-action* concept. It is an impromptu decision based on the unexpected things of different aspects of the lesson happened in classrooms. In addition, it is a 'real-time' solution to generate or enhance the process of teaching and learning. The abovementioned variables and practices, in previous paragraphs, in which influence teachers' decision at that particular time could be understood and deduced by observing their classroom orientation because Thus, these terms do explain similar orientation of teaching alternative that has been adopted by most teachers especially by language educators.

As the aforementioned studies reported and suggested that the theoretical aspects of related variables and concepts that are closely related to teacher decision making (e.g. Woods, 1997), the current study however, investigates the particular ELT classrooms in other contextual orientation in order to identify the 'real-time' aspects of the actions to share some experince of the instructional concerns regarding language teaching and learning process at the local polytechnic's setting in Malaysian context.

C. Research Perspective

This exploratory study was a small part of an on-going postgraduate research. The main intention is to share the initial findings of the lecturers' decision-making effects on their classroom orientation in a local polytechnic context. So, three types of decision making (namely planning decision, interactive decision, and evaluative decision) proposed by Richards & Lockhart (1996) had been chosen in order to

establish the scope of this study. Subsequently, the identification of those decisions would be derived from the participants' teaching practice by observing their action in class, eliciting their verbal responses through interviews, and exploring their written thoughts via their reflective journal entries. Thus, the guided research questions for this study include:

1- What type of decision making employed by participants in their teaching practice?
2- How participants' decision making shapes their classroom orientations?

D. Research Methodology

A fully qualitative case study approach was employed in order to identify English lecturers' decision-making effects towards their classroom orientation in a local polytechnic context. Purposive sampling method was chosen to select the research site and participants. The access and willingness concerns (Creswell, 2007) are the factors that influenced the implementation of this type of sampling. It is beneficial for the researcher to decide on the participants who are accessible, willing to provide information as well as ability to shed light on specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). It complements the nature of a case study orientation. The access to the research site was formally and easily gained due to the familiarity factor. Formerly, researcher was attached to the site as one of the faculty staff. Thus, the existing and established rapport between researcher and participants reduced unfamiliarity factor. This point avoids the unpleasant encounters and increases the personal contact with the participants in which strengthens the reliability of being an interpretative researcher (Creswell, 2007; Marwan, 2009).

1. The participants

Four lecturers were shortlisted as willing participants. They were English lecturers in a local polytechnic. Coincidently, all of them are female but this study would not address any gender-related influences. All participants shared a similar academic background as they had been formally trained as student-teachers before they started their teaching services. In other words, they had similar received knowledge in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language). Their attachment to current polytechnic was ranged between 2 to 8 years.

2. Instrumentation and Analysis

Three approaches were employed in this study. The main source of data was obtained from non-participatory classroom observation. Then, the findings would be crosschecked with the responses from the informal semi-structured interview and entries written in participants' reflective journals. A detail about each procedure is stated in the following paragraphs.

First, non-participatory observations were conducted based on participants' agreement and availability. The class mode during the observations was tutorial session. So, the combination of simple lecture and classroom activity could be observed by the researcher in order to look into four selected elements derived from Richards & Lockhart (1996) idea in investigating second language classroom; approach, lecturer's role and action, students' characteristic, and interaction pattern. The first observation was carried out at the early phase of data collection in gaining initial insight of

participants' teaching practice, and the second one (which was the recorded one) was conducted immediately a week after that in order to establish the context of participants' real practice. All episodes of events happened in the classrooms were recorded in a time-interval observation sheet (Appendix 1) which was also served as a researcher's field note. Any exhibited actions of the participants were closely monitored in order to determine the types of decision making were being displayed during the class sessions.

Second, all participants were individually interviewed. It was conducted immediately after observation sessions were carried out. The main intention was to verbally elicit more confirmation related to their potential decision-making patterns during the class sessions. The different informal open-ended questions were asked after each observation prior to participants' exhibited teaching actions in order to get their verbal justification. All responses were audio-taped upon obtaining participants' permission to do so. Then, their verbal responses were transcribed for the analysis purposes.

Thirdly, participants were also asked to write their reflective journals. It was conducted at the beginning of the data collection phase. They were requested to write daily entries. However, the frequency of 2 to 4 entries per week was also considered for the analysis purpose due to their constraint. Selected entries would be extracted later so that the coherence links related to participants' decision making in their teaching practice could be established and further confirmed any findings from the observations.

Validity issue was addressed. Member-checking (Clark & Creswell, 2010) was conducted in order to confirm the accurate responses of transcriptions and written entries that had been carefully transcribed, retyped, and coded. The findings from the observations would be constantly compared with verbal responses from the transcriptions and written responses from the journals in order to establish the consistent links from the data. It served as a triangulation effort to increase the reliability (Creswell, 2009) of this study via constantly comparing multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007) that confirmed any interpretations made were not merely based on researcher's biasness (Creswell, 2007).

Manual content analysis was run to the data in order to extract relevant data pertaining to decision making characteristics.

E. Findings and Discussion

Results from this case study seem to confirm a combination of several conclusions from different studies (refer Borg, 2003; S. Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Ellis, 2006; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Gutierrez, 2004; Han & Song, 2011a; Lavigne, 2014; Nurusus, 2015; Richards, 2010; Suhaily & Faizah, 2013). Basically, teachers' decision making is derived from their beliefs. Their decisions on the instructional practice, specifically refers to classroom orientation, produce different forms of teaching practices in language classrooms. The elaboration of results and discussions follow will further explain about different teaching practices.

Based on the recorded episodes and notes from the observation sheets, five selected elements of teaching practice had been summarized in order to relate participants' decision making and their classroom orientation (Table 2). The five elements include 1)The activity or material; 2)Approach being conducted, used, and

employed during the observed sessions; 3)Participants' role or action as a lecturer; 4)Students' characteristic during the class; and lastly 5)The interaction pattern. Any italicized phrases in the following discussions represent the original responses from the interview transcripts or journal entries.

Table 2. Summary of observation notes

Considered element	Participant 1 (P1)	Participant 2 (P2)	Participant 3 (P3)	Participant 4 (P4)
1)Activity and /or material	-Discussion on the given worksheet (take-home exercise from the previous session) -Calling up students to answer	-Discussion on homework from the module and classroom activity worksheet -Pinpointing students to answer	-Discussion on take-home worksheet -Asking for volunteers to answer and calling up few students to get involved	-Discussion on take-home worksheet -Asking for volunteers to answers and assigning turns to those who were not
2)Approach	Teacher-centred	Teacher-centred	Teacher-centred & a bit of student-centred	Almost equal mix of teacher-centred & student-centred
3)Lecturer's role/action	Dominate the class session to trigger students' attention and participation in the discussion	Active role from the lecturer to generate the class discussion	Good command in controlling the class especially in triggering students' responses to participate in the discussion	Facilitate the session by giving more information related to topic taught to the students
4)Students' characteristics	Passive students	Passive & low proficiency students	Responsive students who required 'extra' motivation to participate	Responsive & cooperative students
5)Interaction pattern	Mostly one way TL→TQ→PR →TR	Mostly one way TL→TQ→S→X →TR	More TQs in order to generate the discussion	Balance of TL→TQ→PR→TR →PV

In regards to interaction patterns, the common teacher-student interaction pattern as described in the observation in mainstream classes by Brown cited in Richards & Lockhart (1996) was adapted (refer Appendix A for a complete list). Generally, it is noticeable that all participants shared almost a similar orientation in their classroom. Basically, three main points could be deduced.

First point, participants conducted the class activity based on the assigned take-home task from previous class. They generated the discussion by relying on the materials that were being assigned to the students. In their opinions, this effort was meant to *enhance students' understanding*. *Homework*, or more appropriate to be called assignment, was given as *revision to make* the students *understand more about* the topic especially a*fter discussing and giving some notes* slots. Simply said, take-home task is a follow-up activity in enhancing students' understanding.

In regards to this, it can be considered that the participants' effort is definitely a planning decision. It reflects the conclusion by Farrell & Bennis (2013) about the role

of teachers as active reflectors of what is happening in their classrooms. Furthermore, teachers' belief functions as a filter for their instructional judgement (Nurusus, 2015). They acted on students' understanding as their instructional objective during the class session. It is a strategy that language teachers employed to ensure there would be a continuation of the topic taught before they continue with the new one. The rationale is that take-home task is a form of 'comprehension activity' (Richards & Lockhart, 1996) whereby the students have to recall what they learnt. Indirectly, they would work on it and simultaneously revise the lesson by themselves, outside the English classroom. The choice on this task effectiveness could have been derived from the experience that teachers have gone through when they were learners (Ellis, 2006; Suhaily & Faizah, 2013).

Second point, the teacher-centred approach is likely the most preferable strategy applied by the participants to generate their classroom interaction. It is due to their students' characteristic. Participants said that it was impossible to *put trust on the students.* They were in dilemma *for not being teacher-centred.* These are due to the students who *were passive and did not really want to get involved during the activity.* The students were rarely willing to be a *volunteer to answer* the questions asked during the class discussion. Besides that, there were unpleasant attitudes displayed throughout the language class. These include *making noise, coming late to class* and *sleeping at the back;* a display that illustrate students who were *not interest* to *learn English.* As a result, participants had to alter their lesson plans there and then so that *lesson would be more interesting, more meaningful.* For instance, the alteration could be lesson which to be *taught in a fun way* such as *language games* in order to *grow interest* and *attract students' attention.*

These echo what has been concluded by Borg (2003). He stated that the departure from lesson plans among teachers were prompted by the unexpected issues during class, i.e. student misbehaviour and student noncomprehension, as common results found in language classroom. Thus, participants' impromptu responses could be classified as this kind of departure. Moreover, Gutierrez (2004) also stated that social/intellectual climate is a part of lesson dimension in studying teacher cognition. This yields a similar concern addressed by (S. Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). They found out that what experienced language teachers believe in feasibility on learner autonomy yet their teaching practices are often diverted due to students' ability. Hence, it explains why teachers who hold different sorts of belief (or implicit theories) as they go about their work as well as how they vary teaching patterns move into similar orientation in making students understand. Due to that, in certain extent, language teachers take the initiative to integrate the intercultural contact in their classroom orientation as part of ensuring the learners to become proficient language learners (Barnett, 2011; Han & Song, 2011a).

The third and last point, it was noticeable that participants displayed active roles in their classroom teaching episodes. An evidence of their active role could be traced through the interaction pattern recorded during the observation. It can be mostly concluded as one way interaction. The exhibited actions in the class leaned more on teacher question (TQ), teacher lecture (TL), and teacher respond (TR). *Repetitions of instructions, simplifying language,* or, in certain cases, *being bilingual to translate of intended objectives of the lessons are* actions that contribute to more teacher-talks in these classrooms. These represent participants' effort to ensure their students involved in the

activity by dominating the class discussion in order to draw students' attention and to trigger their participation. The participants also needed to be active in generating the discussion. They led by verbally prompting the students into the discussion. Moreover, they gave more information in facilitating the discussion.

This kind of effort is considered as 'active teaching'. This term is used to focus on the teacher's ability to engage students' productivity on learning tasks during the lesson (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Though it is considered as a less preferable approach in communicative language learning environment (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Richards (2010) points can be used to second this finding as practical. He stated that language teaching-learning should involve understanding the dynamics and relationships within the classroom and the rules and behaviours specific to a particular setting. In addition, it matches the second fold concept of language teaching whereby teachers' individual decision synchronizes with a specific variable they encounter at once. Other than that, participants' teaching competency is displayed through their spontaneous action in diverting students' attention back to the lesson. Their different interactive decisions have addressed the immediate issues emerged. In relation to this point, (Lavigne, 2014) discovered that 'teachers who see themselves as responsible (at least in part) for student success are more likely to see the connection between their behaviour and student out- comes'.

In addressing the research questions, it can be deduced that participants' decision making patterns in their ELT practices land on both planning decision and interactive decision. Their choices mostly rely on their students as main consideration in their decision making. For instance, they hold almost similar reactions and views towards their students' response, profiency and attitude. This is because almost all students were passive, less-proficient and less-interested language learners. As a result, participants had limited choice to employ the communicative language learning approach. This circumstance has forced them to be dominant in class. Thus, their planning decision and interactive decision produce an active teaching approach as their language classroom orientation.

Moreover, in polytechnic's context, English language lecturers have the authority to be fully responsible in designing their approach or taking any decisions as long as they could comply with the standardized syllabi. Meaning to say, the participants could have neglected the students' flaws and inaptness in learning English to catch up with the syllabus implementation. Instead, the participants preferred putting effort to put up with the students' progress. For example, although poor performance of students is a complex issue, participants tried to put an attempt to craft their classroom atmosphere that nurtured self-regulation learning. They assigned take-home tasks so that they could assist their students to learn by themselves. Simultaneously, they could continuously keep track on students' performance in order to align their teaching according to students' pace. This is where the culture that teachers develop in the classroom, by the way of the goal orientation that emerges, has important implications for the nature of student motivation and academic behaviour (Bailey et al., 2001; Nurusus, 2015; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Suhaily & Faizah, 2013). Hence, it results on teaching practice that based on active teaching and learner-focused-orieantation.

F. Conclusion

This exploratory study, as a small part of an on-going postgraduate research, has drawn initial findings on a tale of English Language polytechnic lecturers' decision-making effects on their classroom orientation. There are two types of decision making had been identified namely; planning decision and interactive decision. The main factor that generates these decisions is mainly influenced by the abstract features of students' characteristic. English Language polytechnic lecturers' choices to secure the initial drafted plot (i.e. planning decision) or to rely on the impromptu intermission in between the plots (i.e. interactive decision) illustrate different tales of teaching strategies to their lessons, yet their instructional objectives are purely based on students' benefits. Lastly, broader scopes of research areas in future exploration is welcomed to lay more practical findings that depict insights related to language teaching practice at this research population. All in all, language teaching is indeed a complex adaptive system that calls for wider explorations from multiple perspectives.

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APPENDIX A

List of interaction proposed by Brown (1975 cited from Richard & Lockhart, 1996)

TL = *Teacher describes, explains, narrates, directs*
TQ = *Teacher questions*
TR = *Teacher responds to pupil's response*

PR   = *Pupil's response to teacher's questions*
PV   = *Pupil volunteers information, comments or questions*
S   = *Silence*
X   = *Unclassified*

(Simon Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Han & Song, 2011b; Lavigne, 2014; Md Harun & Suravi Al-Amin, 2013)