

# Unlocking Fluency: Evaluating The Japanese Language Mastery Program

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## Abstract

The Japanese language and culture were first introduced into Malaysian education through the Dasar Pandang ke Timur (DPT) (literally “Look East Policy”), initiated by Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in 1982, aiming to emulate successful East Asian practices for Malaysia's development, particularly Japan and South Korea. Initially, Japanese was taught primarily at higher education institutions and selected secondary schools, but not at the elementary level. The Japanese Language Mastery Program (JLMP) at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam was introduced in two foster schools in the Klang Valley as part of the university's commitment to University Social Responsibility (USR), addressing this educational gap. This study evaluates the program's effectiveness in improving students' Japanese proficiency and cultural understanding. Using pre- and post-surveys conducted via Google Forms, involving 61 respondents, the study assessed participants' satisfaction, knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards Japanese. The findings revealed a significant increase in students' interest in Japanese, notable improvements in language skills, and a deepened appreciation for cultural diversity. The JLMP not only enhanced language proficiency but also broadened students' cultural awareness, fostering a greater appreciation of Japanese culture. This initiative not only fills educational gaps but also fosters collaboration between higher education and schools. Future programs should consider longer class durations, explore various foreign languages, and conduct longitudinal studies to assess the long-term benefits of early language and cultural exposure.

**Keywords:** *Japanese Language and Culture, University Social Responsibility, Mastery Program*

## Introduction

### Background of Study

The Japanese language and culture were primarily introduced into Malaysian education through the Look East Policy. Known as Dasar Pandang ke Timur (DPT) in Malay, this policy was established by Malaysia's 5<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, with the main objective of adopting Japanese and Korean working cultures (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, 2022). One of the measures under this policy includes educating Malaysian students in Japanese tertiary institutions and training them in Japanese companies (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, 2022). The involvement of Malaysian students in these Japanese organizations has created a need for learning the Japanese language and culture. Consequently, these students are required to achieve a certain level of Japanese language proficiency before being sent to Japan.

However, exposure to the Japanese language at the elementary school level remains limited compared to universities and secondary schools. This gap can be addressed through the implementation of the University Social Responsibility (USR) Program, which is part of the national higher education agenda

aimed at benefiting the local community. Such initiatives allow universities to share knowledge and expertise with the community, fostering interaction beyond the campus and enabling mutual benefits through various activities.

### **Statement of Problem**

There is an increasing demand not only for tertiary-level students to learn a third language but also for primary-level children to acquire one. Calabrese and Dawes (2008) explain that early foreign language education benefits overall language development and fosters a positive attitude towards different cultures. Despite this, primary school students in Malaysia still have limited exposure to the Japanese language and culture. This gap is evident from the lack of literature or scholarly research on Japanese language education in Malaysian primary schools. Sazlina Abdul Jabbar (2012), in her thesis on Japanese language education in Malaysia and New Zealand, notes that Japanese is primarily taught as an elective subject at the secondary school level in Malaysia. Furthermore, a pre-survey conducted before this program revealed that 86.1% of 36 primary school students had never been exposed to Japanese language and culture. Although there are academic experts in Japanese language and culture in Malaysia, their expertise is not effectively utilized to educate local primary school students.

To address this issue, the Japanese Language Mastery Program (JLMP) was established as a community service initiative led by the Akademi Pengajian Bahasa (APB), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Shah Alam, in collaboration with two public schools in the Klang Valley: Sekolah Kebangsaan Seafield 3 (SKS3) in Subang Jaya and Sekolah Kebangsaan Kampung Jawa 2 (SKKJ2) in Klang. The program was initially established following a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between APB and SKS3, which facilitated collaboration to develop research and programs such as the JLMP. SKKJ2 later joined the program after seeking APB's assistance with extracurricular activities, becoming an APB foster school alongside SKS3.

Historically, students at these schools have lacked exposure to the Japanese language and cross-cultural knowledge. To address this gap, the program was designed to enable APB experts to impart their knowledge to students at no cost. This initiative aligns with Poston et al. (1992), who stated, "A school is a reflection of the community it serves. At the same time, a community is a reflection of its schools." By enhancing students' cultural and linguistic exposure, the program aims to foster a more interconnected and culturally aware community. As the first of its kind implemented by UiTM lecturers with the local community, the program received a 3-star rating in PRIME (Publication Repository Information System Management), a web-based application developed by UiTM for managing research data, including grant applications, publications, intellectual property, and star ratings, and which serves as the reference platform for Malaysia Re-

search Assessment (MyRA) at UiTM. Teaching and learning are conducted through flexible online sessions according to a scheduled plan, utilizing computers and internet access.

### **Objective and Research Questions**

The objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the JLMP in enhancing students' proficiency in Japanese and their understanding of Japanese culture. The study aims to address the following research questions:

- RQ1: What impact does early exposure to the Japanese language have on elementary school students' language acquisition and interest in further language learning?
- RQ2: How does exposure to Japanese culture through educational programs influence elementary school students' understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity?

### **Literature Review**

#### **Language Teaching and Learning through Community Service**

In recent years, there has been an increasing overlap between language teaching and community service. The literature highlights how language learning and teaching can benefit local communities through community service, the challenges faced, and the strategies to overcome these challenges. Lee et al. (2018) provided an overview of the problems and opportunities in community-based service-learning (CBSL) programs focused on community action. They identified three overlapping challenges in CBSL: (1) discussions on service, communities, and learning; (2) methodical execution of these discussions in CBSL partnerships; and (3) adaptation of localized best practices in innovative pedagogies. Lee et al. (2018) argued that addressing these challenges is crucial for shaping the future of CBSL and language education. They also explained that CBSL, combined with language education, offers opportunities for participants to interact, collaborate, and strengthen community ties. Sarbunan (2023) explored how language classes can benefit from involving community service to train students in effective communication for social change. Through secondary and desktop research methods, Sarbunan (2023) found that multilingual learning communities can foster inclusion and cross-cultural understanding. Additionally, cultural understanding can be enhanced through inclusive language education and digital identity.

#### **Exposing Japanese Language and Culture to Schools**

Recently, more schools have begun introducing Japanese language and culture to their students. Early exposure to a foreign language can enhance children's overall language development and education by nurturing positive attitudes towards diverse cultures (Calabrese & Dawes, 2008). Mardani et al. (2020) examined the implementation of the 2013 curriculum for Japanese in elementary schools in Bali, where Japanese has tradi-

tionally been taught only at the high/vocational school level. Their data, collected through questionnaires and interviews, revealed that 20% of schools had implemented the 2013 curriculum for Japanese language. Additionally, 67.4% of students showed a preference for Japanese, expressing interest in Hiragana, Katakana, and Japanese culture and food. Conversely, 33.6% of students found Japanese characters difficult to memorize and were less interested. The study also identified the lack of curriculum-based learning tools as a reason for the suboptimal implementation of the 2013 curriculum. Meanwhile, Mahoney (2009) aimed to investigate the teaching of Japanese culture, as well as teachers' attitudes and beliefs about teaching Japanese culture. Through interviews and observations of two non-native Japanese language teachers from a secondary school in New South Wales, Mahoney (2009) found that teaching Japanese culture was perceived as easier than teaching the Japanese language. However, the approach to teaching Japanese culture varied between the two teachers: one relied on personal experience, while the other encouraged students to reflect on their own backgrounds and experiment with Japanese culture.

### **Conceptual Framework of The Japanese Language Mastery Program (JLMP)**

The JLMP aims to enhance Japanese language proficiency and cultural understanding among primary school students. The program is designed to introduce students to the basics of the Japanese language, while also providing them with insights into Japanese culture, fostering a deeper appreciation and interest in both.

The approach used is based on the Instructional Research Design Method, which involves the design and development process of the program. The program flow (Figure 1) was developed with input from both the JLMP team and the administration of the participating primary schools. The program was then implemented and evaluated for its acceptance and effectiveness. Data collection and analysis primarily focused on assessing the program's effectiveness.

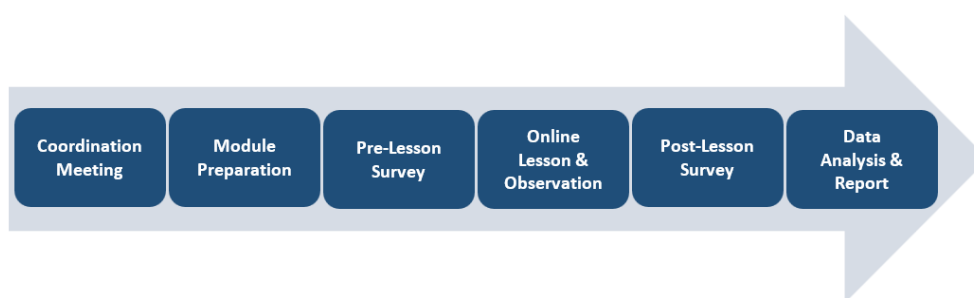


Figure 1: The Flowchart of Japanese Language Mastery Program (JLMP)

## **Methodology**

### **Program Implementation**

The program began with an online coordination meeting between APB, SKS3, and SKKJ2 on Friday, June 9, 2023, from 10:00 am to 12:00 pm via Google Meet (see Figure 2). The meeting introduced the program's

background and established connections between the institutions. It was decided that the program would be conducted every Saturday from November 9, 2023, to December 2, 2023, with each one-hour lesson taking place via Google Meet. The JLMP module, detailing the schedule, topics, and instructors, was prepared following the meeting (see Table 1).

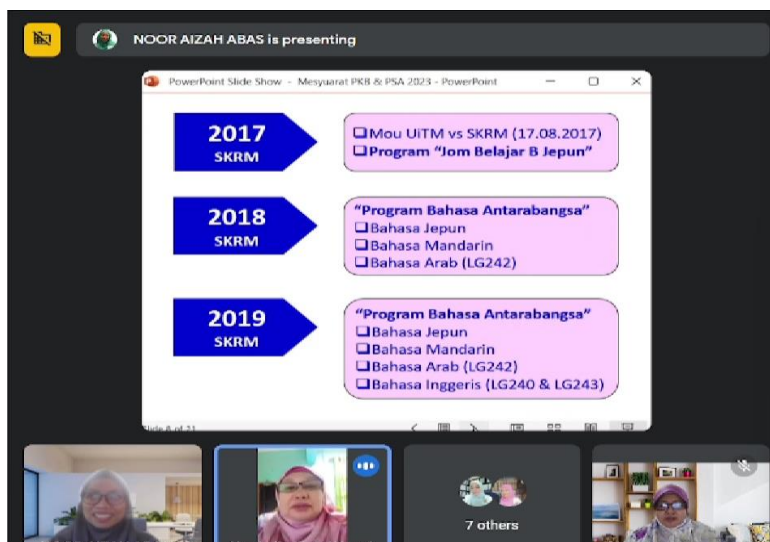


Figure 2: Photo of Coordination Meeting Between APB and SKS3 and SKKJ2

Table 1: The JLMP Module

No	Day/Time	Date	Topic	Instructor
1	SATURDAY (10:00-11:00 am)	19.08.2023	Greetings	Noor Aizah binti Abas
2		09.09.2023	Self-Introduction	Nadiah binti Zubbir
3		16.09.2023	Number	PM Dr Sarinah binti Sharif
4		23.09.2023	Family	PM Dr Normah binti Ahmad
5		30.09.2023	Time	Simah binti Md Noor
6		07.10.2023	Day	Zaiton binti Md Isa
7		14.10.2023	Date	G Sharina binti Shaharuddin
8		21.10.2023	Hobbies	PM Choong Pow Yean

### Participants

The program involved 61 primary school students from SKS3 (31 students) and SKKJ2 (30 students), aged 10 to 11 years (Standards 4 and 5). Participants needed internet access and a smart device, laptop, or computer with a camera and microphone for virtual lessons and surveys conducted via Google Forms. The les-

sons were designed to engage students in Japanese language exercises and activities, with interactive components like self-introduction in Japanese (see Figure 3).

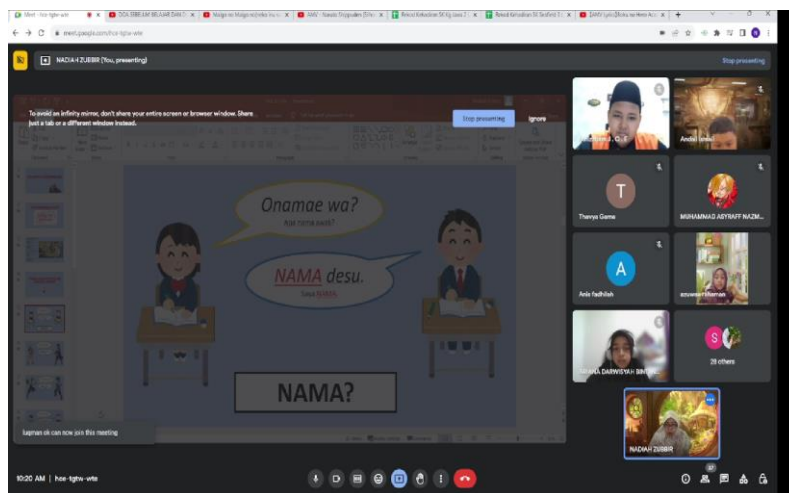


Figure 3: Participants Learning How to Introduce Themselves in Japanese

### Data Collection and Analysis

A quantitative approach was utilized, involving the distribution of questionnaires via Google Forms to the 61 participants. The pre-survey assessed prior exposure to Japanese and was divided into four sections:

- Section A: Assessed interest and satisfaction (five questions).
- Section B: Evaluated Japanese language knowledge (two questions).
- Section C: Measured language skills (four questions).
- Section D: Gauged attitudes towards Japanese (three questions).

Questionnaires were distributed in the first and eighth weeks of the program. Closed-ended questions were used for their simplicity and suitability for primary school students. A post-survey was administered to measure the program's effectiveness and identify significant changes. Data was presented in tables showing percentage differences before and after participation and analyzed descriptively.

In addition to surveys, participant observation was employed to assess engagement and performance. According to Guest et al. (2012), this qualitative method involves immersion in the context to understand behavior. Observations aimed to evaluate participants' engagement in Japanese exercises, their performance, and any improvements over time. The Japanese language instructors, also acting as researchers, conducted these observations while maintaining anonymity and engaging with students. Photos and videos were collected and analyzed to complement survey findings. Additionally, instructors incorporated Japanese-related activities, such as cultural information and songs (see Figure 4), which increased participant interest and engagement.



Figure 4: Participants Sang Japanese Children's Song

## Findings

In this section, the analysis of the pre- and post-surveys will objectively assess the program's effectiveness. This analysis covers items such as interest in and satisfaction with the program, knowledge of the Japanese language, language skills, and attitudes towards Japanese. The data are presented in table format.

### Section A: Interest and satisfaction with the program

Table 2: Interest and Satisfaction

Item		Yes	No
1.1	I am happy that the Japanese Language Class is conducted using Google Meet.	94.7%	5.3%
1.2	I like the way the Japanese language teacher teaches.	100%	0%
1.3	I think 1 hour is enough to learn Japanese.	47.4%	52.6%
1.4	I like the topics covered in the Japanese Language Class.	100%	0%
1.5	I like the activities in the Japanese Language Class.	100%	0%

Table 2 reveals the percentage of participants' interest and satisfaction levels after the program. The data shows that all items received positive feedback: 100% of students expressed that they liked the teaching methods used by the Japanese instructors, the lessons taught, and the activities conducted during the class. Additionally, 94.7% of participants found Google Meet to be a suitable platform for Japanese lessons, while 5.3% disagreed. However, 52.6% of students felt that one hour was insufficient for a Japanese class, with

47.4% considering it adequate. This indicates that more than half of the students prefer Japanese classes to be longer than one hour.

### Section B: Knowledge of the Japanese language

Table 3: Knowledge of the Japanese Language

Item		Before		After	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
2.1	I like learning Japanese.	100%	0%	100%	0%
2.2	I know a lot of words in Japanese.	13.9%	86.1%	68.4%	31.6%

Table 3 illustrates the percentage of participants' knowledge of the Japanese language before and after the program. The findings show that all participants (100%) expressed an interest in learning Japanese both before and after the program, indicating sustained enthusiasm for the language throughout the program. As for the percentage of students with knowledge of the Japanese language, before the program, only 13.9% of participants reported having knowledge of many Japanese words, while 86.1% did not. After the program, there was a notable improvement, with 68.4% of participants now indicating that they know a lot of Japanese words, demonstrating a significant enhancement in their vocabulary knowledge.

### Section C: Japanese language skills

Table 4: Japanese Language Skills

Item		Before		After	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
3.1	I can pronounce a few words in Japanese.	63.9	36.1	94.7	5.3
3.2	I can read a few words in Japanese.	36.1%	63.9	68.4%	31.6
3.3	I can understand when I hear a few words in Japanese.	63.9%	36.1%	89.5%	10.5
3.4	I can write a few words in Japanese.	22.2%	77.8	47.4%	52.6

Table 4 presents the findings related to Japanese language skills among students in the program. Initially, the pre-survey showed that 63.9% of students possessed Japanese speaking skills, while 36.1% did not. After the program, the post-survey revealed a significant increase, with 94.7% of students acquiring speaking

skills, leaving only 5.3% unable to do so. Regarding Japanese reading skills, 36.1% of participants could read Japanese before the program, while 63.9% could not. After the program, 68.4% of participants gained reading skills, with 31.6% still unable to read Japanese. As for Japanese listening skills, the pre-survey indicated that 36.1% of students could understand Japanese when listening, while 63.9% could not. Following the program, 89.5% of students improved their listening comprehension, with 10.5% still struggling. Lastly, in terms of Japanese writing skills, only 22.2% of participants could write in Japanese before the program, while 77.8% could not. Post-program, the number of students who could write in Japanese increased to 47.4%, although the majority (52.6%) remained unable to do so.

**Section D: Attitudes towards the Japanese language**

Table 5: Attitudes Towards the Japanese Language

Item		Before		After	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
4.1	I am interested in learning Japanese.	100%	0%	100%	0%
4.2	I think Japanese is difficult to learn.	33.3%	66.7%	5.3%	94.7%
4.3	I am happy to be able to join the Japanese language class.	100%	0%	100%	0%

Table 5 shows the percentage of participants who found Japanese interesting before and after the program. In both the pre-survey and post-survey, 100% of participants expressed interest in Japanese. The table also illustrates the percentage of participants who found learning Japanese difficult before and after the program. Initially, 66.7% of participants perceived Japanese as easy to learn, while 33.3% did not. After the program, the percentage of participants who found Japanese easy to learn increased significantly to 94.7%, with 5.3% finding it difficult. Additionally, the survey results indicate that 100% of participants were happy to join the Japanese lessons both before and after the program.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The JLMP has demonstrated a significant positive impact on elementary school students' language acquisition and cultural understanding. Regarding Research Question 1, “What impact does early exposure to the Japanese language have on elementary school students' language acquisition and interest in further language learning?”, the JLMP significantly impacted students' Japanese language acquisition and interest in further learning. The program was well-received, with 100% of students expressing satisfaction with the teaching methods, lessons, and activities, and many preferring longer class durations. Notable improvements were

observed in language proficiency: Japanese vocabulary knowledge increased from 13.9% to 68.4%, and speaking skills improved from 63.9% to 94.7%. Observations during the program confirmed these findings, as students were actively engaged in exercises, frequently volunteered to participate, and demonstrated enthusiasm in refining their language skills. The program also promoted student interaction and communication in Japanese, reflecting benefits similar to those observed in community-based service-learning (CBSL) programs, as discussed by Lee et al. (2018).

In addressing Research Question 2, “How does exposure to Japanese culture through educational programs influence elementary school students' understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity?”, the JLMP significantly enhanced students' understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. The program was praised by students, with 100% expressing satisfaction with the teaching methods, lessons, and activities. Observations revealed students' enthusiastic participation and engagement with Japanese cultural elements, such as cultural information and songs, underscoring a deepened appreciation for Japanese culture. This sustained interest aligns with findings from Mardani et al. (2020), which indicated that similar programs foster interest in Japanese language and culture.

Overall, the JLMP effectively broadened students' cultural awareness through engaging educational experiences. The observations supported the quantitative findings, showing that students not only improved their language skills but also became more engaged with Japanese culture. The program has proven to be an effective educational initiative, advancing language skills and promoting cultural diversity among young learners. These findings suggest that similar programs could be beneficial in other educational contexts, contributing to a more culturally aware and linguistically proficient student population.

## **Implication and Recommendations for Future Research**

The JLMP aligns with the DPT Policy, emphasizing the value of early Japanese language education and training for Malaysian students (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, 2022). The program demonstrated significant improvements in elementary students' Japanese language skills across speaking, reading, listening, and writing, validating the effectiveness of structured language programs for early acquisition. The overwhelmingly positive feedback from students, who appreciated the teaching methods, lessons, and activities, suggests that well-designed educational experiences can greatly enhance enthusiasm for language learning. Additionally, the preference for longer class durations indicates that extending class time could further improve language skills and student engagement. The program also likely fostered a deeper understanding and appreciation of Japanese culture, consistent with research showing that exposure to foreign languages and cultures enhances cultural awareness and diversity.

For future research, it is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term effects of early Japanese language exposure on proficiency and cultural appreciation. Additionally, exploring the impact of different class durations could provide insights into optimizing program structure. Comparative studies of various foreign language programs can help identify effective strategies for diverse language education. Gathering feedback from instructors and parents can offer a fuller picture of program effectiveness and areas for improvement. Additionally, examining the effectiveness of language programs in rural versus urban settings could reveal disparities and inform resource allocation. Lastly, integrating community-based service-learning (CBSL) elements into language programs should be explored to understand how real-world experiences influence language skills and cultural awareness. Addressing these areas will enhance language education programs and promote greater cultural understanding among students.

### **Author Contributions**

Conceptualization, N.A.A.; methodology, N.Z., N.A.A. and H.U.H.; formal analysis, N.A.A. and N.Z.; investigation, N.A.A. and N.Z.; data curation, N.A.A.; writing—original draft preparation, N.A.A. and N.Z.; writing—review and editing, N.Z. and N.A.A.; supervision, H.U.H.; project administration, N.A.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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### **Data Availability Statement**

The participants of this study did not provide written consent for their data to be shared publicly, as they are primary school students.

### **Conflicts of interest**

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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## Design and Development of *Synonym Battlefield*: A Gamified Approach to Enhancing Vocabulary Diversity in Academic Writing

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### Abstract

This paper presents the conceptualisation, design and development process of *Synonym Battlefield*, a board game aimed at addressing the challenge of insufficient vocabulary knowledge among non-native English-speaking university students, particularly in the context of academic writing. While vocabulary diversity is essential for academic success, many students face challenges related to vocabulary repetition, often stemming from restricted lexical awareness and constrained language repertoires. To tackle this, this study introduces gamified strategies to promote synonym usage through an engaging and interactive gameplay experience. Using iterative design processes and playtesting, the game was evaluated for its efficacy in enhancing vocabulary diversity and academic writing proficiency. The findings demonstrate the potential of educational game design to overcome language learning challenges, foster meaningful engagement, and support academic success. The results underscore the transformative potential of educational game design in addressing language acquisition challenges, fostering sustained learner engagement, and contributing to academic success in higher education contexts.

**Keywords:** *language teaching, gamified, educational game design, vocabulary development, synonym*

### Introduction

In today's academic landscape, mastering vocabulary diversity is essential for success in scholarly endeavours. However, non-native English-speaking university students often struggle with limited vocabulary knowledge, particularly in academic writing, which leads to challenges such as repetitive word usage. To effectively address these issues, innovative approaches like gamification are gaining recognition. Gamification, as defined by Suryadi et al. (2023), integrates game-like features such as challenges, rewards, and progress tracking into educational settings, making learning more engaging and enjoyable through gaming principles and mechanics.

This paper focuses on the innovative design and development of *Synonym Battlefield*, a gamified board game aimed at reducing vocabulary repetition among university students. By fostering synonym awareness and enhancing vocabulary diversity, this approach tackles one of the most persistent barriers faced by non-native English-speaking students in academic writing.

While traditional methods, such as dictionary use, have proven effective for vocabulary acquisition, they often fail to sustain student engagement. For instance, Phung and Nguyen (2021) demonstrated that synonym and antonym dictionaries boosted student motivation and learning outcomes, while Mokhtar et al. (2010) highlighted the role of dictionaries in helping learners understand unfamiliar words. However, these tools alone do not address the motivational and interactive needs of modern learners. Hartt et al. (2020) emphasized that game-based learning strategies, when integrated into education, enhance engagement and improve learning outcomes compared to conventional methods.

Research further highlights the struggles of non-native English-speaking university students with synonym usage. Katagiri (2019) noted that vocabulary repetition often stems from limited lexical range and unfamiliarity with alternative vocabulary options. In Malaysia, Mokhtar et al. (2021) found that tertiary students, despite over 12 years of formal English education, lacked sufficient vocabulary breadth to express themselves effectively in academic contexts. These challenges underscore the need for innovative teaching strategies to foster vocabulary growth and reduce repetition. This deficit often resulted in redundant word usage, impeding their ability to convey complex ideas effectively and confidently. These findings highlight the inadequacy of traditional teaching methods in equipping students with the lexical tools required for academic success. The repeated challenges across different contexts suggest an urgent need for innovative and interactive pedagogical strategies that prioritise vocabulary expansion. Approaches such as gamification and collaborative learning offer potential solutions by creating engaging environments where learners can actively explore and practice synonym usage, thereby fostering greater lexical diversity and reducing the over-reliance on repetitive language structures.

Gamification has shown significant promise in addressing these issues. Rawendy et al. (2017) found that integrating gamification with mnemonic strategies, such as the keyword and loci methods, enhances learners' enthusiasm for language mastery. Additionally, Cónego et al. (2024) noted that Millennials and Generation Z, with their extensive familiarity with digital technologies, are particularly receptive to gamified learning, making it a practical and effective approach for vocabulary acquisition. The success of gamification lies in its ability to bridge the gap between traditional teaching methodologies and the evolving expectations of digitally savvy learners. By transforming vocabulary acquisition into an engaging and goal-oriented activity, gamification not only addresses the issue of limited lexical diversity but also cultivates a more positive attitude toward language learning. As such, it presents a powerful, scalable, and contextually relevant strategy for enhancing vocabulary growth across diverse educational settings.

The proposed *Synonym Battlefield* board game leverages gamification to enhance synonym awareness, reduce vocabulary repetition, and encourage diverse word usage. Inspired by Katagiri's (2019) emphasis on synonym awareness, the game incorporates interactive mechanics to promote engagement and practi-

cal application of vocabulary knowledge. Its development and testing phases have ensured an effective and enjoyable learning experience tailored to the needs of non-native English speakers.

The objectives of this study are:

1. To develop and evaluate the effectiveness of the *Synonym Battlefield* board game in addressing vocabulary repetition.
2. To examine the impact of the game on students' engagement, motivation, and ability to use synonyms in academic writing.

By addressing these objectives, this research seeks to contribute to the fields of gamified education and language learning, providing a pathway for improving academic writing skills through innovative teaching strategies.

## Literature Review

### Gamification in Education

Gamification employs game mechanics such as challenges, rewards, and interactivity to foster engagement, motivation, and active participation in educational contexts (Suryadi et al., 2023). Research has consistently highlighted its potential to enhance learning outcomes.

For instance, Hartt et al. (2020) found that students preferred gamified lectures over traditional methods, noting increased engagement and collaborative learning. Similarly, a meta-analytic review by Kim and Castelli (2021) demonstrated that gamified interventions effectively improved behavioural outcomes and cognitive skills, particularly in short-term applications.

Innovative implementations of gamification, such as Suryadi et al.'s (2022) *ReadOn* application, illustrate its adaptability to modern learners' needs. Designed to improve reading comprehension among Generation Z university students, the app incorporated game elements that leveraged users' familiarity with digital technologies. Through carefully designed features such as rewards, progress tracking, and interactive challenges, the application succeeded in transforming reading into an engaging and goal-oriented activity. Feedback from users indicated significant gains in engagement and comprehension, underscoring gamification's flexibility in addressing diverse academic challenges.

Broader studies, such as those by Manzano-León et al. (2021), have also validated gamification's ability to enhance academic performance and motivation while fostering essential skills like critical thinking and teamwork. Together, these findings highlight gamification's transformative potential, particularly in making educational content more interactive and learner focused. These findings underscore gamification's transformative potential in reshaping traditional educational paradigms. Unlike conventional teaching methods that often prioritise passive knowledge consumption, gamification shifts the focus toward active, learner-centred experiences. This approach not only increases student participation but also supports diverse

learning styles, making educational content more accessible and adaptable to individual needs. The interactive nature of gamified learning also promotes sustained interest, allowing students to remain engaged with challenging material over extended periods.

### **Vocabulary Learning and Gamification**

Vocabulary acquisition is a cornerstone of language learning but presents challenges for non-native speakers, including limited lexical diversity and over-reliance on repetitive vocabulary. Traditional tools, such as dictionaries, have long been effective in addressing these issues. For example, Phung and Nguyen (2021) found that synonym and antonym dictionaries increased learners' motivation and engagement, leading to positive outcomes. Mokhtar et al. (2010) similarly emphasized dictionaries' utility in helping students understand unfamiliar words. However, these studies focus predominantly on traditional methods without considering how gamification could complement or enhance these approaches.

Gamification introduces a dynamic alternative, offering interactive and engaging experiences that traditional methods lack. Rawendy et al. (2017) demonstrated the effectiveness of gamification when combined with mnemonic strategies, such as the keyword method and loci, in enhancing enthusiasm for language learning. This approach is particularly effective for Millennials and Generation Z learners, who are accustomed to digital interactivity (Cónego et al., 2024).

The potential of gamification in vocabulary learning is supported by Katagiri's (2019) findings, which suggest that synonym awareness can reduce repetitive language use and improve lexical variety in writing. While existing research has explored gamification's role in developing skills such as reading comprehension (Suryadi et al., 2022), there remains limited exploration of its application in vocabulary acquisition, particularly in fostering synonym diversity. Moreover, the scarcity of research in this area highlights an opportunity to examine how gamified approaches could bridge persistent gaps in traditional language education. Non-native English-speaking learners often experience limited lexical awareness, resulting from rote memorisation techniques and a lack of meaningful, contextual vocabulary practice. Gamification, with its focus on active participation and real-time feedback, provides a platform for learners to explore synonyms in an immersive and practical context, thus reinforcing retention and application.

### **Bridging the Gap**

This study contributes to the growing body of research on gamification by demonstrating its application in a previously unexplored domain: synonym acquisition and usage in academic writing. By addressing the limitations of traditional vocabulary learning methods, such as a lack of engagement and interactivity, it highlights how gamified approaches can enhance learning experiences. Through the design and implementation of *Synonym Battlefield*, this study aims to bridge the gap between traditional vocabulary strategies and gam-

ification, offering a novel pathway to overcoming the challenges of vocabulary repetition and limited lexical variety in academic writing.

## **Methodology**

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in Constructivist Learning Theory, which emphasises the role of active participation and social interaction in knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978). Constructivism posits that learners build knowledge more effectively through hands-on experiences and collaboration, making it an ideal foundation for gamified learning environments. By engaging students in the competitive and collaborative gameplay of *Synonym Battlefield*, the study aligns with this framework to foster vocabulary acquisition in meaningful contexts.

### **Research Design**

This research adopts a Design-Based Research (DBR) approach, a methodology specifically suited for creating and iteratively refining educational tools and interventions in real-world settings (Barab & Squire, 2004). DBR integrates theory with practice by testing and refining innovations through systematic cycles of design, implementation, and evaluation. By employing this methodology, the study ensures that the game's design and instructional effectiveness are responsive to the needs of learners and educators.

### **Observational Studies**

Preliminary observations assessed students' existing vocabulary knowledge, engagement levels, and attitudes towards traditional teaching methods. This diagnostic phase was crucial in shaping the design framework of the board game, ensuring its pedagogical alignment with the learners' cognitive needs, linguistic challenges, and preferred learning styles. These insights guided the design and development of the board game to foster active participation, enhance vocabulary acquisition, and promote sustained engagement in the language learning journey.

### **Iterative Design Process**

The game was developed using a structured iterative design process, informed by DBR principles (Reeves, 2006). Each iteration involved collecting feedback from educators and students during playtesting sessions. Core features, such as chance cards, gameplay mechanics, and board layout, were revised across multiple cycles to optimize the game's educational impact and engagement potential.

## Participants

Participants consisted of university students of Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak Branch, Mukah Campus, from various language proficiency backgrounds. Each playtesting session involved a new cohort of students, enabling the collection of diverse data on gameplay behaviors, interactions, and learning outcomes.

## Playtesting and Data Collection

Playtesting sessions were conducted in controlled classroom environments. Observational techniques were employed to examine students' engagement levels, synonym usage, and overall gameplay experience. Data were collected through:

1. **Field notes** documenting gameplay interactions, strategies and use of synonyms.
2. **Post-session reflections** where students shared feedback on the game's design and educational value.

## Game Mechanics, Instructional Phrases, and Rationale

The following paragraphs illustrate the details of the game mechanics, instructional phases, and the rationale for each stage, offering a thorough understanding of how *Synonym Battlefield* operates as an effective educational tool.

### Stage 1: Introduction (5 minutes)

The initial phase of the lesson focuses on refreshing students' prior knowledge and setting the context for the day's activities. The teacher begins by asking students about their understanding of synonyms and encourages them to share examples they know. This interactive session serves two primary purposes: it helps students recall their existing knowledge of synonyms and provides an overview of the lesson's objectives.

By engaging students in recalling and sharing their knowledge, the teacher not only assesses the students' current understanding but also creates an interactive and inclusive learning environment. This sets a positive tone for the lesson, ensuring that students are mentally prepared for the activities that follow.

### Stage 2: Presentation (5 minutes)

In this phase, the teacher defines synonyms and presents common academic phrases and words using a PowerPoint presentation. This structured presentation helps in establishing a clear understanding of synonyms and their applications. The presentation serves as a foundational step, ensuring that students have a clear and precise understanding of synonyms. By presenting common academic phrases and words, the teacher prepares students for the practical application of these concepts in the subsequent tasks.

### Stage 3: Practice (5 minutes)

AAAAa. Students then engage in a hands-on activity where they use dictionaries to find definitions and list three synonyms for given words. They write these synonyms on a whiteboard in turns, promoting active participation and collaborative learning. This practical exercise familiarizes students with new words and encourages extensive reading. It also teaches them how to effectively use dictionaries, thereby enhancing their research skills and vocabulary acquisition. Writing on the whiteboard promotes a collaborative learning environment where students can learn from each other.

### Stage 4: Production (20 minutes)

The core of the lesson is the introduction of the war-themed board game *Synonym Battlefield*. Students are divided into two groups, *Team West*, and *Team East*, each led by a *Commander*. The gameplay incorporates dynamic mechanics, including **Chance Cards**, which consist of **Bomb Cards** for launching attacks on the opposing team and **Sandbag Cards** for fortifying defenses. The game mechanics involve teams using chance cards; that is a Bomb card to attack opponents and a Sandbag card to defend themselves; and quickly providing synonyms for given words to move forward on the board. The first team to reach the finish line wins.

The game is designed to reinforce students' recall and application of synonyms in a dynamic and competitive environment. It strengthens memory retention, fosters team spirit, and boosts confidence. Additionally, the game encourages strategic thinking and leadership skills, as students must decide how to use their chance cards effectively and respond promptly with synonyms.

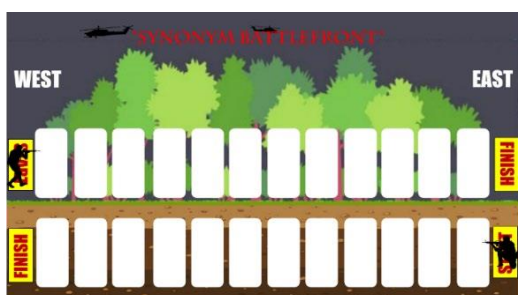


Figure 1: Board Game Template



Figure 2: Chance Cards

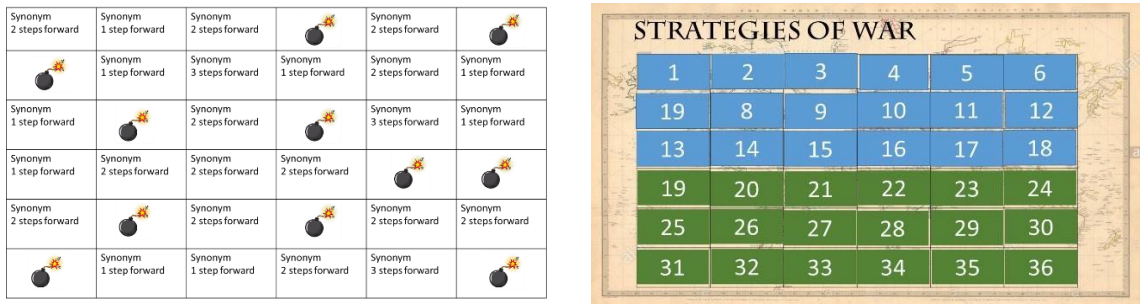


Figure 3: The team leader selects a question number, revealing how many synonyms are needed to advance (e.g., two synonyms = two spaces)

**Stage 5: Closure (5 minutes)**

The lesson concludes with a sharing session where students discuss what they have learned, what they enjoyed, and what could be improved. This reflective activity allows students to express their thoughts and provides the teacher with valuable feedback on the lesson’s effectiveness.

Reflection is a critical aspect of the learning process. This sharing session helps students consolidate their learning, provides insights into their experiences, and helps the teacher assess whether the lesson objectives were met. It also fosters a culture of open communication and continuous improvement.

**Finding and Discussion**

The findings from the implementation of *Synonym Battlefield* reveal several important insights into the effectiveness of gamified learning in vocabulary acquisition.

Firstly, the high level of student engagement and enjoyment underscores the importance of incorporating interactive and fun elements into educational activities. When students enjoy what they are learning, their motivation and retention levels increase significantly. This finding aligns with educational theories that suggest students’ intrinsic motivation is strengthened when they are actively engaged and derive satisfaction from their activities. As a result, this increased motivation contributes to more efficient and long-lasting learning outcomes. Furthermore, the enjoyment experienced from the game also contributes to fostering a positive classroom atmosphere, an essential element in creating an optimal learning environment. The war-themed and competitive nature of *Synonym Battlefield* effectively captured students’ interest, making the learning process both enjoyable and memorable.

Secondly, the improvement in students’ quick-thinking abilities suggests that time- bound challenges can be beneficial in enhancing cognitive skills. This aspect of the game fosters students’ capacity to think swiftly and retrieve vocabulary promptly, thereby cultivating a highly valuable skill set in both everyday communication and academic environments. By requiring students to provide synonyms within a short time

frame, the game encouraged them to think on their feet and quickly recall relevant vocabulary. The augmentation of quick-thinking abilities implies that time-constrained challenges in educational games can function as a potent instrument for cognitive advancement. This skill is particularly valuable in real-world communication scenarios where prompt responses are often required.

Also, a comparative analysis was conducted on students' written assignments before and after the implementation of *Synonym Battlefront*. Results indicated a notable reduction in vocabulary repetition and an increase in the use of diverse vocabulary, enhancing the quality of academic writing. This improvement demonstrates that the game effectively expanded students' lexical resources and enhanced their proficiency in using synonyms accurately in their writing. The greater diversity in vocabulary not only enriched the students' written expression but also elevated the overall quality of their academic work. These outcomes highlight the potential of the game in facilitating vocabulary acquisition and improving students' writing abilities, both of which are essential for academic success. Furthermore, the game's success suggests broader applications for similar gamified approaches in other areas of language learning, such as improving grammatical accuracy or enhancing reading comprehension. By integrating such tools into the curriculum, educators can create a more engaging and effective framework for addressing the linguistic and cognitive demands of academic writing. These findings reaffirm the importance of innovative pedagogical strategies in equipping students with the skills necessary for academic and professional success.

Finally, the competitive aspect of the game also played a crucial role in motivating students. The desire to win and outperform their peers drove students to actively participate and engage with the content. This finding highlights the potential of competition as a motivating factor in educational settings. The success of *Synonym Battlefront* in bolstering students' enthusiasm for language mastery substantiates these assertions and emphasizes the potential of gamified methodologies to render learning more enticing and efficacious. The findings confirmed Rawendy et al.'s (2017) claim that integrating gamification can significantly enhance students' enthusiasm for language mastery. This is particularly evident among Generation Z participants, who are known for their openness and adaptability to gamified approaches, as highlighted by Cónego et al. (2024).

The success of *Synonym Battlefront* has important implications for educational practice. It shows that incorporating game-based learning strategies can greatly improve student engagement, cognitive abilities, and academic achievements in various subjects. Educators can use the motivational and cognitive benefits of gamification to create more dynamic and effective learning experiences. Additionally, the positive feedback from students and improved academic outcomes suggest that gamified learning can be a valuable addition to traditional teaching methods, offering a comprehensive approach that combines enjoyment with challenging academic exercises.

## Conclusion

The *Synonym Battlefront* board game offers a unique solution for non-native English-speaking university students grappling with vocabulary challenges in academic writing. Through gamified strategies and extensive testing, it promises an enjoyable learning experience, fostering meaningful engagement and improving academic writing proficiency. This innovative approach not only addresses language barriers but also holds significant commercialization potential in educational markets. Beyond its commercial value, *Synonym Battlefront* aligns with global initiatives for inclusive education and societal empowerment, making it a promising tool for language development and academic success. While the initial results are promising, there are limitations to this study. The sample size was relatively small, and the study did not include a control group for comparison. Future research should incorporate larger, more diverse samples and control groups to validate the findings. Long-term studies are needed to assess the lasting impact of the game on vocabulary retention and academic performance. Additionally, exploring the game's adaptability to different educational contexts and its effectiveness across various proficiency levels would be beneficial.

## Author contributions

Fakhira Jafri conceived the original idea for *Synonym Battlefront*, led the conceptualization, methodology, project administration, and wrote the initial draft. She conducted the majority of the research and oversaw the overall design and development process of *Synonym Battlefront*. Stefanie Natasha Rich Joseph significantly assisted in refining the methodology and findings and reviewed relevant literature on vocabulary acquisition and educational game design. Cindy Robert edited the content for clarity, coherence, and academic rigor while Adeena Mazwa Rabytah Amir Abdullah revised the manuscript for intellectual content.

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This research did not receive any financial aid.

## Data availability statement

The data related to the design and development process of *Synonym Battlefront* are available within the paper itself, including descriptions of the game mechanics, methodology, playtesting results, and educational principles incorporated. Additional details or clarifications regarding the game's development can be provided upon request.

## **Conflicts of interest**

In order to develop an iterative design process, the game was conducted multiple times during workshops and class time as part of a lesson plan, involving students who also participated in the study. One primary potential conflict arises from the fact that the students who participated in the game were also the subjects of the study, which could introduce biases.

These students were enrolled in courses taught by some of the authors, creating a potential for biases due to the authors' professional interest in the study's outcomes. The educators' professional interest in achieving positive outcomes could inadvertently influence their teaching methods or interactions with students, with the aim of obtaining favorable results. This bias may manifest in various ways. Instructors might unconsciously favor the game in classroom activities, allocating more time and resources to it compared to other methods, thus distorting the data. Furthermore, students might feel compelled to perform well to please their instructor or out of concern that their grades might be affected, even if unintentionally. To address this issue, ensuring voluntary participation and clearly communicating that student performance in the game will not impact their grades can help mitigate these biases. Additionally, involving external evaluators in the data collection and analysis process can provide a more objective perspective. To address this, steps were taken to ensure transparency, voluntary participation, and unbiased data collection and analysis.

Another potential conflict arises from the emphasis on gamification and competition, which may not be suitable for all students. This could potentially induce stress or anxiety in students who struggle in competitive environments. Moreover, some students may find the competitive nature of the game to be overwhelming, ultimately having a negative impact on their learning experience and overall well-being. The excessive emphasis on winning could overshadow the educational objectives, leading to increased anxiety and reduced enjoyment of the learning process. To address this issue, it is essential to incorporate reflective and supportive elements into the game. It is crucial to ensure that the game promotes learning and collaboration rather than solely focusing on competition. Additionally, providing support for students who feel stressed by the competitive aspects of the game is of utmost importance. Teachers should closely monitor students' reactions to the game and be prepared to offer alternative activities if necessary. Ultimately, the success of gamified approaches in education depends on their ability to accommodate diverse learner needs. By prioritising collaboration, inclusivity, and emotional well-being alongside competition, educators can create a more holistic and equitable learning environment. This ensures that the gamified experience not only achieves its educational objectives but also supports the broader developmental and psychological needs of all students.

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## Unlocking Excellence: English Language Teacher Quality Model (ELTQM)

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### Abstract

The journey towards teaching excellence in the dynamic landscape of English as a Second Language (ESL) education remains a persistent challenge due to fragmented approaches to defining and assessing teacher quality. Existing frameworks often focus narrowly on isolated attributes, overlooking the holistic interplay of cognitive skills, social-emotional competencies (SEC), and personal characteristics necessary for impactful teaching. Addressing this gap, an innovative English Language Teacher Quality Model (ELTQM) redefines the paradigm by synthesising passion, cognitive abilities, SEC, and personality traits into a unified framework. Grounded in phenomenological research and informed by practical insights from 13 expert ESL teachers, this model transcends conventional notions of teacher effectiveness, embracing the holistic development of educators as catalysts for transformative learning experiences. Central to this model is the recognition of educators as lifelong learners driven by a deep love for teaching and commitment to continuous professional growth. By integrating cognitive skills, such as pedagogical knowledge and language proficiency, with SEC like empathy and adaptability, ELTQM equips teachers with versatile guidelines to navigate diverse classroom environments confidently and compassionately. ELTQM contributes to teacher education (TE) institutions and policymakers by suggesting a more holistic assessment tool and targeted professional development initiatives. Through the adoption of ELTQM, institutions can cultivate a culture of excellence, foster collaborative learning communities and empower educators to unlock their full potential while inspiring student success.

**Keywords:** *ESL education, holistic development, lifelong learning, teacher quality, transformative journey*

### Introduction

Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities are the foundations of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), established by the United Nations (United Nations, 2015). Central to achieving this goal is the recognition that the quality of education is profoundly influenced by the competencies and attributes of teachers, particularly in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) education (Schleicher, 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In an increasingly globalized world, marked by rising migration and diverse, multicultural classrooms, the demand for highly skilled ESL teachers has never been more critical. Meeting this demand necessitates a comprehensive framework that defines, assesses, and supports teacher quality, equipping educators to address diverse learner needs and facilitate effective language acquisition.

Traditionally, teacher assessments have focused narrowly on technical skills and language proficiency, often neglecting essential social-emotional competencies and affective traits that play a vital role in classroom dynamics and student success (Day & Gu, 2010). Addressing this gap, the English Language Teacher Quality Model (ELTQM) was developed based on the insights of 13 expert ESL teachers who provided valuable perspectives on the attributes of quality English language educators. Their voices highlight the importance of a holistic approach that integrates passion, cognitive abilities, and social-emotional competencies into a unified framework for teacher quality. Grounded in phenomenological inquiry, this study introduces ELTQM as a pioneering initiative aligned with SDG 4. The model offers a transformative vision of teacher quality, emphasising the interconnectedness of technical expertise, empathy, adaptability, and lifelong learning. By synthesising these key domains, ELTQM contributes to the global pursuit of inclusive and high-quality education, equipping educators to inspire and empower learners in diverse contexts.

The ELTQM is built upon four foundational domains: passion, cognitive abilities, social-emotional competencies, and personality traits. Each domain encapsulates specific attributes essential for high-quality teaching. Passion encompasses the love for teaching and dedication to lifelong learning. Cognitive abilities include proficiency in English, pedagogical content knowledge, and classroom management skills. Social-emotional competencies cover emotional intelligence, empathy, adaptability, and interpersonal skills. These social-emotional competencies are crucial for positive development and occupational achievement (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Schoon, 2021). Personality traits highlight the importance of being approachable, flexible, reflective, creative, innovative, and patient. This model aims to provide a holistic understanding of teacher quality, promoting a balanced development of both professional skills and personal attributes (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

The development of the ELTQM is informed by a thorough review of existing literature and empirical research, emphasising the multifaceted nature of effective teaching. The ELTQM offers a robust framework for teacher assessment, professional development, and policy formulation by integrating theoretical insights with practical considerations. This paper presents the conceptualisation and development process of the ELTQM, highlighting its potential to transform ESL education and advance SDG 4 by integrating new standards for teacher quality and excellence. By proposing innovative assessment tools and targeted interventions, the ELTQM seeks to empower educators, enhance teaching effectiveness, and ultimately improve student learning outcomes, thereby contributing to the global goal of ensuring quality education for all.

## Literature Review

### Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), introduced by Albert Bandura (1986), offers a robust foundation for understanding teacher quality in English as a Second Language (ESL) education. SCT posits that human behaviour is shaped by a dynamic interplay of personal, behavioural, and environmental factors. In the context of ESL education, this theory emphasizes the importance of teacher self-efficacy, cognitive capabilities, and emotional regulation in shaping instructional practices and student outcomes.

Teacher self-efficacy—a central concept in SCT—refers to educators' beliefs in their ability to influence student learning, even in challenging environments (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Research demonstrates that high self-efficacy correlates with innovative teaching practices, resilience, and better classroom management. For ESL teachers, self-efficacy is crucial as they navigate linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. Bandura's (1997) emphasis on the role of observational learning and modelling highlights the importance of professional development and mentorship in fostering teacher growth, aligning closely with the goals of the ELTQM.

Social-emotional competencies, another component of SCT, are increasingly recognized as vital for effective teaching. ESL teachers, who often work with students from varied cultural backgrounds, require empathy, adaptability, and interpersonal skills to create inclusive learning environments. By integrating SCT, the ELTQM acknowledges these competencies as integral to teacher quality, offering a holistic approach to professional assessment and development.

### Threshold Concepts

The concept of Threshold Concepts, introduced by Meyer and Land (2003), provides another critical lens for examining teacher quality in ESL education. Threshold Concepts are transformative, integrative, and often troublesome ideas that serve as portals to new ways of thinking and practicing within a discipline. For ESL teachers, grasping Threshold Concepts such as cultural responsiveness, language acquisition theory, and reflective practice is essential for professional growth.

Threshold Concepts are not merely additive; they fundamentally change how teachers understand and engage with their practice. For instance, understanding the concept of interlanguage—the transitional linguistic system learners develop—can reshape how ESL teachers approach error correction and curriculum design (Liang, 2020).

The ELTQM incorporates Threshold Concepts to emphasise the transformative journey and nature of the teaching profession. By identifying these critical junctures, it helps to inspire teacher education programmes to design curricula and professional development initiatives that facilitate deep, meaningful learning experiences.

## **Communities of Practice**

Another theory that provides a social framework for understanding how ESL teachers develop expertise and maintain professional growth is the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP), developed by Wenger (1998). A CoP is a group of individuals who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better through regular interaction. In ESL teaching, CoPs often emerge informally among teachers within schools, professional organisations, or online platforms.

Participation in a CoP fosters the sharing of best practices, collaborative problem-solving, and mutual learning, which are critical for addressing the complex demands of ESL classrooms. Wenger (1998) identifies three core components of CoPs: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. For ESL teachers, these components manifest in collaborative lesson planning, discussions about student progress, and best practices and resources.

By incorporating CoP principles, this study emphasises the social dimensions of teacher quality. The ELTQM encourages the establishment of collaborative learning communities where teachers can refine their skills, share insights, and collectively address challenges. This aligns with research highlighting the positive impact of peer collaboration on teacher efficacy and student outcomes (Nilsen & Gustafsson, 2016).

Richards and Rodgers (2014) argue that ESL teaching requires specialized frameworks that account for both pedagogical and affective competencies. They highlight the need for assessment tools that capture the complexities of teaching in multilingual classrooms. The ELTQM builds on these findings by integrating theoretical and practical dimensions of teacher quality into a unified framework.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This research employs a qualitative research design, adopting a phenomenological approach to examine expert ESL teachers' lived experiences and perspectives on quality teaching. This methodology aligns with the study's objective to provide rich, detailed insights into the social interactions and teaching experiences that shape the attributes of a quality English language teacher. By focusing on the holistic interplay of cognitive skills, social-emotional competencies, and personality traits, the phenomenological approach facilitates the exploration and conceptualisation of the English Language Teacher Quality Model (ELTQM). This research design is well-suited to uncover the various dimensions of teaching excellence, contributing to the development of a robust model aligned with contemporary educational needs.

## **Participants**

The study engaged 13 expert ESL teachers, each with over ten years of teaching experience in diverse educational settings, ranging from 12 to 33 years. Participants were selected for their recognised expertise, validated through their promotion under the Excellent Teacher Scheme (Guru Cemerlang) or their roles as Heads of the English Panel (Ketua Panitia). Additionally, their English proficiency levels were classified as CEFR C1 to C2, based on the Aptis proficiency test mandated by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE). These educators provided valuable perspectives on quality teaching, drawn from their extensive experiences as language educators.

## **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing the participants (identified as T1 to T13) to share their detailed insights into the attributes and practices of quality English language teaching. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences and perceptions of effective teaching.

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards, with approvals secured from the National Defence University of Malaysia (NDUM), MoE, the State Education Department (JPN), the local District Education Office (PPD), and the participating institutions. Participants were informed of their rights, including the freedom to ask questions, withdraw from the study at any time, and maintain anonymity to ensure their contributions did not affect their professional standing or status. These measures ensured a secure and transparent research environment.

## **Data Analysis and Peer Debriefing**

Data from the interviews were transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti (version 22). Employing the coding methods by Saldana (2013) and thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2022), the researcher used a mixed approach to analysis, allowing themes to emerge both inductively from the participants' experiences and perspectives and deductively from previous literature. Two research team members initially listened to the audio recordings and read and transcribed the data. Next, using Atlas.ti, the researchers highlighted segments of the transcripts and labelled them with relevant codes. These codes were categorised based on similarities, with any redundancies or inconsistencies resolved. The coded segments were then transferred into a matrix table to establish themes.

The research team held several peer-debriefing sessions to discuss participants' responses, codes, and irregular cases, facilitating agreement on recurring themes. This iterative process involved multiple interactions between the text, codes, and themes, leading to an interpretive phase where the units were integrated into an explanatory framework consistent with the text. Themes were further clustered, and descriptive

phrases were allotted to each theme. Two expert reviewers were appointed to corroborate and validate the findings to ensure the validity of the themes and the domains of the ELTQM as a whole. Figure 1 shows the diagrammatic representation of the data analysis procedure.

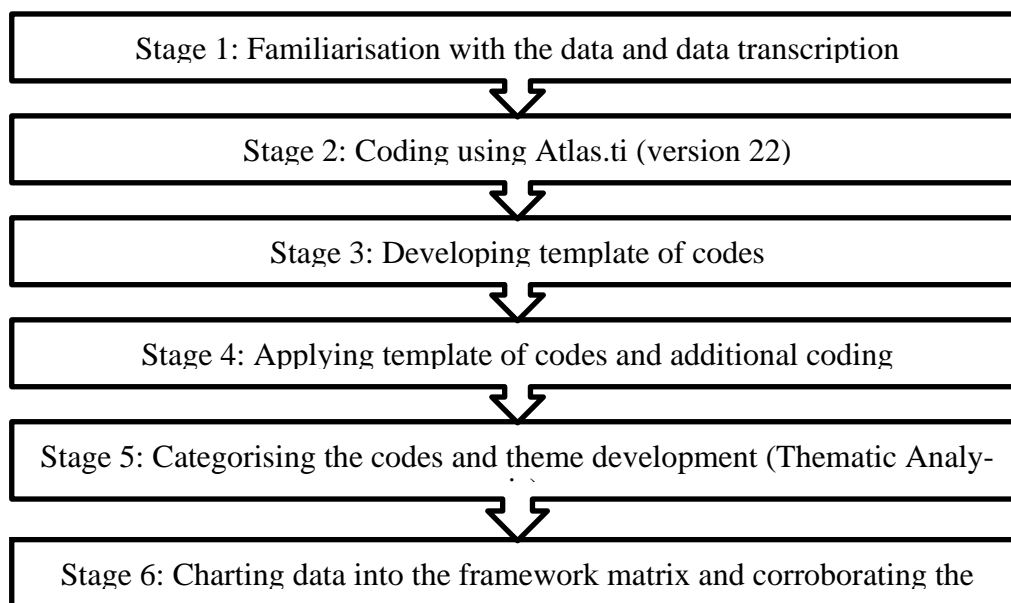


Figure 1: Data Analysis Procedure

## Findings

In exploring the critical factors that constitute teacher quality in the context of English language teaching (ELT), this study draws on semi-structured interviews with 13 expert ESL teachers. The findings revealed four main themes that define the attributes of quality English language teachers: passion for teaching, cognitive abilities, social-emotional competencies (SEC), and personality traits. These themes highlight the multi-faceted nature of teacher quality and underscore the diverse skills and characteristics essential for effective language instruction. Table 1 provides a summary of these attributes, encapsulating the primary domains of the ELTQM as identified through the responses of the participating expert teachers.

Table 1: Attributes of quality English language teachers

Attributes	Manifestations (sub-themes)	Examples/Descriptions
<b>Passion for teaching</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Passionate</li> <li>● Lifelong learning</li> <li>● Committed</li> <li>● Dedicated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Love, excitement and commitment to teaching</li> <li>● Self-development</li> <li>● Genuine interest in student development.</li> <li>● Willing to share knowledge and best practices</li> </ul>
<b>Cognitive abilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Proficiency</li> <li>● Pedagogical knowledge and skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mastery of the language</li> <li>● Effective teacher talk</li> <li>● Pedagogical Content knowledge</li> <li>● Classroom management skills</li> </ul>

<b>Social-emotional competencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Emotional Intelligence</li> <li>● Adaptability</li> <li>● People skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Empathy</li> <li>● Compassion</li> <li>● Human touch</li> <li>● Embracing challenges</li> </ul>
<b>Personality traits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Approachable</li> <li>● Flexible and open</li> <li>● Reflective</li> <li>● Creative and innovative</li> <li>● Patient</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Relationship-building</li> <li>● Modify/adapt lessons</li> <li>● Admitting mistakes</li> <li>● Finding alternative approaches</li> </ul>

When participants were asked about the essential qualities of an excellent English language teacher, passion for teaching emerged as the primary criterion. This finding is surprising considering the prevalent emphasis on proficiency as the primary criterion for recruiting English language teachers. However, the interviews and member-checking procedures conducted in this study reveal that passion for teaching is indeed an essential attribute of a quality English language teacher. Without passion, teachers would struggle to perform their tasks effectively, fail to create a positive impact on their students, and would not survive in their early teaching career.

*You must have that passion to teach because it is only that that will sustain you through all this stuff. If not, I think I would have quit so long ago. I mean, even in my first few years, perhaps I would have quit after facing all those criticisms. Whereas the passion, I mean, what kept me going during that time was, the students enjoying. And then I was enjoying myself, you know. (T6)*

Additionally, T4 emphasized the necessity of having a passion for the subject matter and a genuine concern for the students, stating that without these attributes, one can "kill the teaching profession." Although T4 acknowledged the possibility of being a good teacher without passion, true success in teaching requires a genuine and deep-rooted passion for the profession that extends beyond the confines of the classroom;

*Need to be passionate about students, not only the subject...and you need to love your students...You need to be passionate for teaching. For teachers, have passion first then only you teach. Because if you don't have the passion, you're going to kill the teaching profession...I know you can be a good teacher but without passion, you cannot go beyond just in school (sic). (T4)*

Furthermore, cognitive abilities emerged as another quality attribute of English language teachers. The analysis revealed two sub-themes associated with cognitive abilities: English language proficiency level and pedagogical content knowledge and skills. This study's results support the significant role of the teacher's cognitive abilities, especially in influencing classroom instruction, classroom management and the teacher's self-efficacy. When discussing the role of proficiency in influencing student performance, participants consistently expressed the view that proficiency is crucial for becoming a quality English language teacher and for effective teaching.

*Of course, you should have at least above-average proficiency, definitely. Because some students, they're quite proficient in English, and once they realize that you make mistakes or you're not as good, they will really look down on you. (T5)*

Notably, the importance of pedagogical knowledge and skills harmonises seamlessly with the tenets outlined in the Malaysian Teacher Standards (MTS) established in 2009. These standards dictate that teachers should possess a firm grasp of the subject matter, curriculum, and co-curriculum in order to teach effectively. Moreover, these benchmarks underscore the vitalness of expertise in teaching and learning skills, particularly in lesson planning, execution, and evaluation (Goh & Wong, 2015).

The analysis of quality English language teacher attributes revealed another significant finding: the importance of Social-Emotional Competencies (SEC). Teachers with a high EQ can better connect with their students, understand their needs, and foster a supportive learning environment. EQ empowers teachers to recognize and appropriately respond to their students' emotions, improving engagement and learning outcomes.

*I'm a strong believer in Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence because we were talking about IQ, but we've forgotten about EQ... Emotional quotient... I think nowadays some teachers actually lack EQ... They focus more on IQ, but some of them really lack EQ; this is through my observation... So, those are the elements that have been left out in a teacher. So, EQ plays a very huge role in a teacher's life as well... It's not only IQ, but EQ as well. (T3)*

This perspective emphasizes the importance of EQ in teachers' ability to connect with students, understand their needs, create a supportive learning environment, manage behaviour, handle stress, and maintain professionalism. This result ties nicely with previous studies wherein they found that SEC is essential in terms of transfer of knowledge because they feel that students are more motivated to engage in the lessons if

teachers use positive emotions in their teaching (Aldrup et al., 2022; Korotaj & Mrnjaus, 2021). Korotaj and Mrnjaus (2021) further explained that teachers who view themselves as emotionally competent are likely to enhance their student's self-confidence, and they are inclined to get to know their students by considering their specific needs. These teachers also were more confident in their abilities to help the students, a similar finding found in this study. Social-emotional competencies are getting more attention as significant predictors of various life outcomes, such as educational and occupational goals, well-being and health. (Schoon, 2021). They are equally important as cognitive abilities in building a teacher's identity.

Personality traits were identified as essential attributes of quality teachers, with participants highlighting five key traits: being approachable, flexible and open, creative and innovative, reflective, and patient. Being approachable was seen as crucial for building a positive relationship with the students to gain their trust and interest in the lessons. The participants used the words such as 'friendly', 'confidant', 'make friends', and 'rapport' to describe the desired teacher-student relationship. Flexibility and openness allowed teachers to adapt their methods and strategies to cater to the diverse needs and learning styles of students. Creativity and innovation were also highlighted as valuable attributes, enabling teachers to design engaging lessons that address challenges like short attention spans and passive learning tendencies common in some classrooms. Furthermore, embracing mistakes as opportunities for learning were seen as positive traits that foster mutual respect and a shared learning journey with students. Lastly, patience was emphasized as vital for accommodating different learning paces and challenges in the classroom.

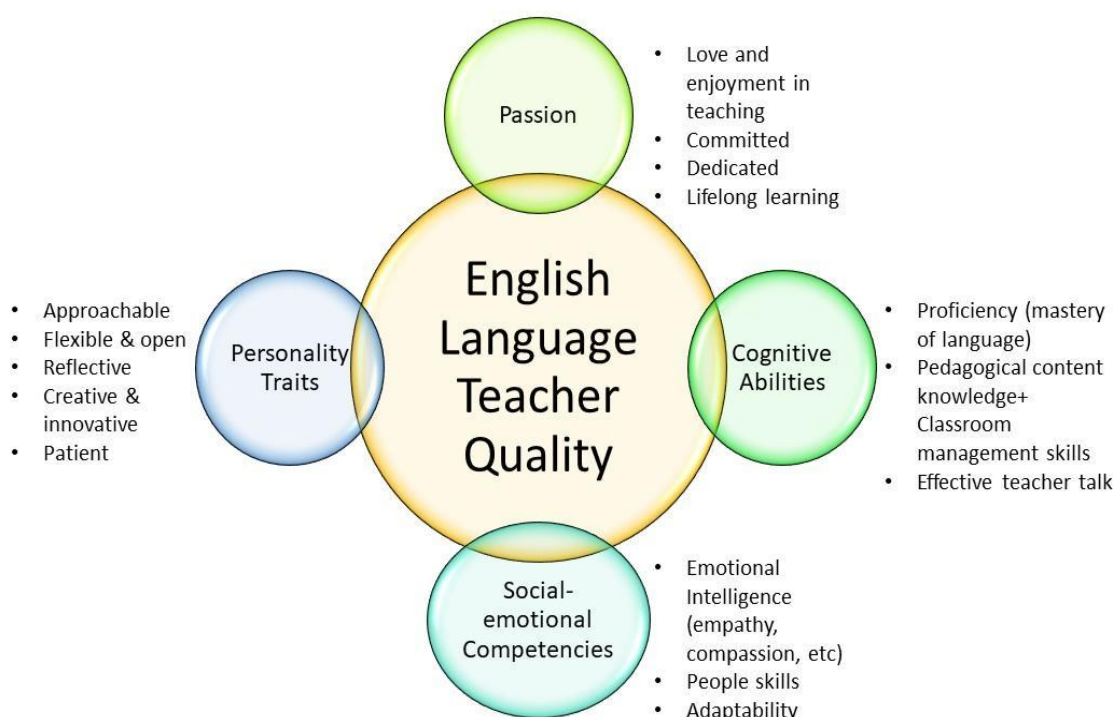


Figure 2: English Language Teacher Quality Model (ELTQM)

Based on these findings, the English Language Teacher Quality Model (ELTQM) was developed to address the limitations in current teacher education programs, which often neglect the social-emotional competencies (SEC) crucial for effective teaching (Rezazadeh et al., 2023). This model emphasizes a holistic perspective on teacher quality, integrating four key domains: passion (affective aspect), cognitive abilities (cognitive aspect), SEC (social-emotional aspect), and personality traits (behavioral aspect). These dimensions collectively provide a comprehensive framework for evaluating and enhancing teacher effectiveness. Figure 2 illustrates how the ELTQM maps onto these different domains. Identifying these multi-dimensional aspects within teacher quality is necessary to facilitate efforts to build on specific teacher attributes and direct focus to other salient aspects or domains in teacher professional development.

## **Discussion**

While passion for teaching is not typically categorised as a social-emotional competency, it is closely related to the affective aspects of teaching and can contribute to the overall effectiveness of an English teacher. In this study, passion for teaching is considered a motivational factor that drives teachers to engage with their students, create a positive learning environment, and continuously improve their instructional practices. This finding echoes the statement by Mart and Deniz (2013), who claimed that a teacher who is passionate about their subject could consider a problem from various angles and is constantly engaged in their classroom. A passionate teacher will work hard to establish a close teacher-learner relationship to create an exciting and positive learning environment that facilitates student development through a supportive learning environment. (Aldrup et al., 2022). Day (2004) supports this statement and claims that when students perceive their teacher's unwavering dedication to a specific field of study and the maintenance of high standards within it, they are more likely to approach their work with a sense of importance, following the teacher's inspiring example rather than feeling coerced or submissive.

It is also important to note that most of the participants in this study believed that teachers not only need to be good in their content knowledge, but they have to be good pedagogically. In other words, teachers not only need to know what to deliver to the students, but they also need to know how to deliver the lessons effectively. The study's findings align with previous insights by Kepol (2017), which highlighted the importance of two criteria - pedagogical competence and mastery of the English language - as the foundation for defining teacher quality within the Malaysian English language teaching context.

Nevertheless, cognitive abilities alone are insufficient in defining or describing quality English teachers. The findings have shown that social-emotional competencies (SEC) are equally important yet often neglected in teacher-training programmes. According to Kepol (2017), looking at teacher quality based on pedagogical competence and mastery of the English language alone has not been able to capture the com-

plexity and dynamics of the concept of teacher quality. Many other attributes work together in tandem to develop a teacher's quality that a teacher should possess and demonstrate. The results of this current study emphasise the importance of SEC in building solid teacher-student relationships, adapting to the dynamic nature of the educational landscape, understanding and interpreting students' struggles and emotions, motivating classroom engagement, and establishing good relationships with the school community.

SEC was not focused in previous studies as there is a lack of consensus on the definitions and shared approaches in assessment procedures, which poses questions regarding their usefulness in education. In a study by Korotaj and Mrnjaus (2021), they discovered that teachers are aware of the importance of developing SEC but also stressed that there is a lack of such training in both initial teacher education and professional development. However, recent efforts and studies have encouraged the development of SEC through frameworks such as Collaborative for Academic, Social Emotional Learning (CASEL), which aims to promote positive learning environments that are supportive and engaging for SEC development (Gresham et al., 2020; Schoon, 2021).

The findings also elucidate some personality traits that were essential attributes of quality teachers: approachability, flexibility, openness to novel ideas, creativity, innovation, reflexivity, and patience. Drawing a comparative lens to the investigation by Jones et al. (2019), where a psycho-lexical analysis yielded five overarching constructs within the Big Five framework to categorise personality descriptions, it is apparent that some of these defined attributes mirror facets of extraversion and agreeableness (as evident in approachability and openness to suggestions), openness (embodied by creativity and innovation), and conscientiousness and neuroticism (reflected in patience). Costa et al. (2019) describe personality traits as relatively stable dispositions that underpin certain behaviours, cognitions, and emotions across varying circumstances and temporal dimensions. They also found evidence that suggests that these personality traits could evolve or transform due to environmental factors and interventions.

The insights from this study demonstrated the importance of incorporating innovative pedagogies, fostering an environment that embraces imperfection, cultivating an amicable rapport with students akin to friendship, and demonstrating unwavering patience when grappling with challenges. By manifesting these attributes, teachers can create an environment encouraging growth, trust, and meaningful engagement with the language and subject matter. A similar conclusion was drawn by Hamid et al. (2012) and Mohammaditabar et al. (2020), highlighting the essential role of personality traits in shaping quality teachers and effective teaching.

## **Conclusion**

The English Language Teacher Quality Model (ELTQM) represents a significant advancement in the field of teacher assessment and professional development. By synthesising insights from Social Cognitive The-

ry, Threshold Concepts, and Communities of Practice, the ELTQM offers a holistic framework that addresses the multifaceted nature of teacher quality.

The model emphasizes the interconnectedness of cognitive skills, social-emotional competencies, and professional growth, providing a comprehensive approach to evaluating and supporting ESL teachers. ELTQM captures and maps vital aspects critical to defining teacher quality. This model could serve as a framework to inform, facilitate and review existing assessment tools so that teacher quality is measured from the cognitive aspects (e.g., language proficiency) and other attributes such as social-emotional competencies. Thus, it promotes a more comprehensive appraisal of teacher quality. Furthermore, ELTQM can also be used as a supplementary tool for self-assessment and professional development, allowing teachers to demonstrate their proficiency in the different dimensions of teacher quality. This model introduces a fresh perspective on teacher attributes and qualities, diverging from those focusing only on teachers' technical competencies. It harmonises personal and professional attributes, blending ideology with practice and heart with mind. This holistic approach shapes a comprehensive roadmap for both the initial and continuous development of ESL teachers.

The insights derived from this project not only guide the design of pertinent teacher development courses but also provide implications for the formulation of potential interventions through dynamic and systematic training, reinforcement, monitoring, evaluation and support strategies. These interventions are aimed at fostering the development of high-quality and resilient teachers, in alignment with the aspirations articulated in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, Malaysian Teacher Standards and the global Sustainable Development Goals.

While the development of the ELTQM offers significant insights into teacher quality and professional development, it also opens avenues for further exploration. Future studies should investigate the applicability and adaptability of the ELTQM in diverse educational contexts, such as rural, urban, and international ESL settings. This research could examine how cultural and systemic differences influence the model's implementation and effectiveness, ensuring its relevance across varied educational contexts. Additionally, given the increasing role of digital tools in education, future research could explore the integration of technology into the ELTQM framework. Studies might focus on how digital platforms and tools can support self-assessment, peer collaboration, and targeted professional development, enhancing the model's accessibility for ESL teachers worldwide.

## Author contributions

Study conception and design: N.A., and A.T.F.S.; Data collection: N.A.; Analysis and interpretation of results: N.A., and E.W.B; Writing - draft preparation: N.A., and A.T.F.S.; Writing – Reviewing and editing: E.W.B. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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## Data availability statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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## Navigating Racial Slurs: Pragmatic Insights from Malaysian Political Tweets

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### Abstract

Malaysia, as a multicultural nation after its independence in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, was still threatened by racial tensions due to the lack of cultural awareness. The lack of cultural awareness and pragmatics competence in intercultural communication was manifested in the usage of racial slurs. As racial slurs were commonly used to insult other races, the usage of such words endorsed racism and racial discrimination, which resulted in social and racial disharmony. This study examined the pragmatics behind the usage of racial slurs in Malaysian political tweets to understand their implications on intercultural communication and social harmony. The study used purposive sampling to select fifteen postings containing racial slurs using a qualitative research design with a content analysis method. The study analysed the pragmatics behind the usage of racial slurs in Malaysian political tweets. The findings showed that although not all racial slurs were categorised as weaponised, the results indicated that Malaysians had the opportunity to select their language conscientiously, choosing neutral alternatives or refraining from using slurs entirely to show respect for other races. This held significant importance for the diverse society of Malaysia, where the preservation of social and racial harmony should not be put at risk.

**Keywords:** *multi-cultural, multi-racial country, political tweets, racial slur, social harmony*

### Introduction

Malaysia is known for its cultural diversity and unity, especially after its independence in 1957 and formation in 1963. The Peninsular is the home to many ethnic groups such as Malays, Chinese, and Indians, as well as Negrito, Proto Malay, and Senoi, the Indigenous people of Malaysia. In Sabah and Sarawak, there are more than fifty ethnic groups, including Kadazan-Dusun, Bajau, Suluk, Iban, Melanau and Kadayan (Damin et al., 2016). From this, it is visible and commendable that the cultural differences in Malaysia do not hinder its people from respecting each other, demonstrating how the unity of Malaysians is bound by not just culture and patriotism but also the willingness to understand the faiths of others (Rahman, 2021). Unfortunately, despite the common notion that Malaysia is a country home to many ethnicities, there are still racial tensions among its people (Abdul Hamid & Zawawi, 2023; Ang & Kock, 2023). The social contract established to obtain independence from British colonialism - Bumiputera rights and privileges in Article 152 & Article 153 of the constitution - has led to racial tension in the present day as the Bumiputeras wish to maintain their right while others call for a country for all (Faruqi, 2008; Mohsin et al., 2020). According to

the Malaysia Racism Report (Pusat KOMAS, 2023), racial politics was the most significant contributor to the racial tension among Malaysians in 2022. Racial slurs stem from ongoing racial tensions, fueling a cycle of racism that persists without end. Such use of language is present in many Malaysians, although it is not always explicit (Lino & Hashim, 2019; Mohsin et al., 2020). Insensitive usage of racial slurs or racial-targeted remarks will offend the people of the said culture, leading to social disharmony in Malaysia.

With the advancement and accessibility of today's technology, social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly known as Twitter from 2006 to 2013), has allowed people to voice their opinions. Rasmussen (2013) mentioned that the Internet encourages participation in campaigns and movements and exchanging views on various issues. These exchanges include negative ones like discrimination, cyberbullying, and fights. This study is interested in investigating the use of racial slurs against the three dominant ethnic groups in Malaysia, Malays, Indians, and Chinese, on X during a specific period, the 15th General Election. The three ethnic groups were chosen, as Mohsin et al. (2020) stated that there was racial tension between them due to factors like the history of Malaysia (e.g., Article 153 of the Constitution of Malaysia, 13 May incident) and racial politics, which have led to a deep-rooted racism among some Malaysians.

## **Literature Review**

Multiple researchers have defined racial slurs to describe the extent to which it is offensive to the members of racial groups. Richard (2008) explained racial slurs as words with the primary purpose of hurting, menacing and subjugating people of different racial and ethnic groups. Following Kaplan's (1999) theory on descriptive and expressive content, two sides of a spectrum emerged where some considered racial slurs to be absolute expressivism (Richard, 2008; Anderson & Lepore, 2013; Hedger, 2012; Hess, 2021; Jeshion, 2013) and another emphasised conditional usage of slurs as a descriptive measure, according to the circumstances (Boromisza-Habashi, 2007; O'Dea et al., 2015; O'Dea & Saucier, 2016; Diaz-Legaspe, 2019).

Richard (2008) expressed concern about allowing the descriptive use of racial slurs, focusing on "simply about its use." He highlighted the pragmatic aspect of slur usage, where the word carries illocutionary force, indicating its intended meaning. Anderson and Lepore (2013) considered racial slurs as inherently racist, as the targeted races find the terms offensive. Hess (2021) argued that using a slur is inherently derogatory, irrespective of intention, as it implies accepting its meaning. Other researchers agreed that endorsing the descriptive use of racial slurs implies agreement with the epithets' actual meaning, condoning racism (Richard, 2008; Hedger, 2012; Camp, 2013).

Regarding the descriptive use of racial slurs, factors like the relationship between interlocutors, the context of the conversation, and the intended meaning must be considered. O'Dea and Saucier (2016) stated that racial slurs vary in the level of offensiveness, with slurs among friends perceived as less offensive than

those from strangers. Racial slurs usage in a humorous context is also one of the circumstances where descriptive use of racial slurs could occur (Boromisza-Habashi, 2007; Diaz-Legaspe, 2019). Expressive usage of racial slurs is linked to a higher perceived level of offensiveness, and it depends on the acceptance of the hearer, which is also affected by the relationship between them and the speaker as well as the context of the conversation.

Some researchers suggest a mixed approach to analysing the pragmatics and semantics of racial slurs (Bach, 2018; Croom, 2014). Bach (2018) proposed loaded descriptivism, an updated version of hybrid expressivism, suggesting that slurs have a secondary meaning loaded into them, combining descriptive use with implicit expressiveness. On the other hand, Croom (2014) proposed an empirical approach to slurs, stating that the offensiveness depends on how slurs are used in natural language. The slurs may not always be offensive, and judgments should be based on empirical evidence. He illustrated this by discussing restrictions on using a specific racial term, suggesting that it should depend on the context and agreement within a community rather than being dictated by external standards.

### **Racism, Racial Slurs and Racial Politics in Malaysia**

Malaysia, despite its multicultural population of over 60 years, still faces racial tensions. Pusat KOMAS' (2022) Malaysia Racial Discrimination Report 2021 highlighted a rise in racism and discrimination incidents, with racial and religious politics being the most prominent at 28 per cent. Malaysian politics, historically influenced by race and religion, has perpetuated social stratification and division among racial groups. The political system, favouring ethnic-based governance, contributes to racial discrimination and racism, especially when leaders invoke racial harmony selectively.

Racial slurs, used by individuals and groups, exacerbate social harmony issues, notably in politics. Instances include a political figure slurring a Malaysian Indian athlete who brought the Malaysian team to the semifinal Sudirman Cup (Vignesh, 2021) and a Malay candidate being insulted during elections when he represented a Chinese-dominated political party (Yusof, 2022). These racial slurs, often online, contribute to cyberbullying and divisive narratives on social media. The 15th Malaysian General Election witnessed a surge in race-based narratives, emphasising the influence of social media in shaping public opinion. Despite Malaysia's multicultural identity, research on racial slurs is scarce. Sensitivity around topics like racial discrimination, religion, and politics adds complexity.

### **X and its Role in Malaysian Politics**

With its 280-character limit, X remains popular in Malaysia, boasting around 4.4 million users in early 2022 (Kemp, 2022). Despite its brevity, X is a versatile platform for communicating, sharing thoughts, and staying informed. Features like hashtags, trending topics, threads, and Spaces (live forums) facilitate easy access

to news, making it particularly appealing to the youth (Abdullah et al., 2021; Ahmad et al., 2023). The platform's high traffic supports various uses, including news dissemination, rumour circulation, protests, campaigns, discussions, learning, and emergency communication (Sadapotto et al., 2021).

Within the Malaysian X community, political discussions are commonplace, especially with the occurrence of the 15th General Election (GE15) in late 2022. This trend is not new, as political discourse on X was already diverse and extensive during the 13th General Election, according to Kasmani et al. (2014). They noted the vast array of information, including links to political news articles, YouTube videos, Facebook posts, and other forms of content circulating on the platform. The authors concluded that political discussions on X contribute to democratic awareness, enhance political literacy, and promote increased political participation among users, regardless of their political affiliations.

Notable political movements gaining traction on X include #KerajaanGagal, #BenderaPutih, #KitaJagaKita, and the Bersih (The Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections) Movement. These movements, mainly the first three, aimed to highlight government shortcomings and propose solutions to social and political issues. The impact of these online movements was substantial enough to effect change. Johns and Cheong (2019) affirmed the effectiveness of social media and online networks in mobilising and sustaining social movements, emphasising their strategic role in raising awareness and funds.

Social media, especially X, can bring political figures both criticism and a platform for effective communication with supporters or the public. According to Lim and Lee-won (2016), maintaining an online social presence is akin to having a physical presence, enabling improved communication that leaves positive impressions, especially for political figures.

In the Malaysian context, Adanan and Sualman (2018) discovered that young voters view virtual engagement as a tool to establish politicians' credibility and trustworthiness from the Malaysian perspective. While online activity does not guarantee automatic success, it goes beyond societal presence and relevance, encompassing the personality and mindset required to be a representative and leader. This is why political figures are increasingly active online, aiming to stay relevant and become key opinion leaders despite the potential for scrutiny, comments, and criticism from netizens.

### **Racial Slurs Against Majority Races in Malaysian Political Tweets**

In general, Malaysian political discourse, the slurs *meleis* and *isley* are often mentioned to offend a Malay whose political beliefs are right winged. However, it is important also to note that these two terms are usually used by and not limited to the Malays themselves against other Malays or Muslims, especially when their opinion differs (Nurul Najihah & Mohd Nordin, 2019). The reason these are considered slur words is because they project hatred against a racial group or an attribute of the racial group.

The word ‘*keling*’ initially referred to the people who came from the Kalinga kingdom (Dhinesha, 2020; Meddegoda, 2021; Nizha, 2018), has a negative connotation in the Malaysian context. It carries no respect or disrespect towards the receiver (Ambikaipaiker, 2008). The word also serves as an adverb or adjective such as *janji keling* and *cakap macam keling*, which rooted from internalised negative stereotypes and racism against Indians (Altabaa & Fadzir, 2022). As a slur, *keling* can also translate to ‘dirty,’ ‘noisy,’ ‘disgusting’ and ‘problematic’ (Stop calling Indians *Keling*, 2023). Another word is *pariah*, associated with the lowest caste among Indians. Most media practitioners refuse to include in any of their reports and postings because social media platforms, including Facebook, would ban or block posts with the word *pariah* as well as *keling* (Azahar et al., 2022). All in all, the usage of these two words is considered offensive to the Indian community because of the negative meaning they carry.

The word ‘*sepet*’ is an adjective to describe eye shape, and it is often used as a weapon against the Chinese as a slur, making it offensive against the racial community. The next word is DAP. It stands for the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a Malaysian political party that has been labelled as a chauvinistic political party since the demographic of its members is dominated by the Chinese (Tan, 2021; Ilah, 2022). This has made the word DAP synonymous with ‘Cina’ or Chinese in general, making it an adjective or adverb to describe the Chinese and, at some point, a pronoun to refer to the Chinese. The next word is Kafir. According to Nasrine (2011), the word Kafir (كافر) is an Arabic word with the meaning of a "disbeliever" or "rejecter". While it is a word used in the Holy Book of Al-Quran, Muslims in Malaysia would use the word to refer to non-Muslims as an insult (Ting & Shamsul, 2022). While these three words are commonly used in daily conversation, the context of the usage and the connotation they carry are what makes them racially pejorative against the Chinese community.

The study analysed racial slurs used against the majority of races in Malaysian political tweets in terms of the types and context(s) in which the racial slurs are used. Based on past studies, common racial slurs against the three primary races are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: The Common Racial Slurs against the Malay, Indian and Chinese

Race	Slurs	Explanation
Malays	<i>Meleis</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A wordplay of Malays.</li> <li>● Used to describe a Malay with radical views on religious and social issues (Nurul Najihah &amp; Mohd Nordin, 2019; Tham &amp; Ahmad, 2021).</li> </ul>
	<i>Isley</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A wordplay of Islam.</li> <li>● Used to describe PAS supporters and Muslims who are perceived to be ‘conservatives’ and ‘extremists’ (Ahmad Fahmi, 2022).</li> </ul>
Indian	<i>Keling</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Originated from the kingdom of Kalinga.</li> <li>● Used as an adjective or adverb following racial stereotypes against Indians.</li> </ul>

	<i>Pariah</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Historically meant to refer to an indigenous individual from southern India.</li> <li>Used to show association with the lowest caste in the Indian society.</li> </ul>
Chinese	<i>Sepet</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literally means slanted (eyes)</li> <li>Used as a synonymous to a Chinese person</li> </ul>
	<i>DAP</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A political party viewed as a Chinese-majority organisation.</li> <li>At some point, is considered a communist, chauvinistic party</li> </ul>
	<i>Cina Kafir</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kafir - an Arabic word meaning infidel or non-believer.</li> <li>Used to derogate the non-Muslims by the ‘believers’ of Islam—mainly against the Chinese in the Malaysian context.</li> </ul>

### Related Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Researchers have proposed different frameworks to understand the use of racial slurs. Scholars categorise the usage into descriptive (providing literal meaning about another race) and expressive (conveying emotions or attitudes towards another race). Kaplan (1999) introduced these distinctions and emphasised the impact of tone and sentential form on the meaning of expressive words.

Hedger (2012) applied Kaplan's framework but disagreed on the descriptive use, arguing that racial slurs are fully expressive, reflecting hatred and contempt. Hedger concluded that uttering racial slurs is problematic regardless of intention or context.

Nunberg (2018) introduced the concept of ventriloquist implicature, suggesting that the offensiveness of slurs arises from conversational implicature. Nunberg (2018) argued that using slurs is a pragmatic failure violating the Gricean maxim of manners where the speaker fails to be appropriate in the conversation and that an epithet will always have a neutral counterpart, which the speaker fails to consider the better word choice. He emphasised the importance of considering alternative, neutral terms.

Falbo (2021) proposed two classifications for slurs. Demonstrative use allows for replacing slurs with pronouns or names, considering awkwardness in some situations. Weapon use involves using slurs offensively when silence would be more appropriate. Falbo identified weapon use as one of the most offensive communication strategies.

### Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design with a content analysis method for its data analysis. Qualitative research design focuses on understanding the meaning and reason behind phenomena based on assumptions and theoretical perspectives, usually related to how individuals or groups perceive society (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020), while content analysis analyses texts qualitatively to make meaning and sense of the persons and their words (Vromen, 2010; Lindgren et al., 2020). The qualitative research design and content analysis approach is suitable for the study as it focuses on analysing racial slurs

used against the majority of races in Malaysian political tweets in terms of the types and context(s) in which the racial slurs are used.

Data for the study was gathered from X. Britannica (2022) defines X as an online microblogging platform with tweets or short messages of less than 280 characters. X has a large population of users where the posts are publicly accessible and can be screened through their advanced search with multiple terms for a topic, which can be utilised to purposely sample tweets in exploring and understanding emerging phenomena (Sibona & Walczak, 2012; Sibona et al., 2020). For the study, fifteen political tweets containing racial slurs against certain racial groups, either from individuals or public entities, were identified. Homogenous purposive sampling was used as it focused on a particular population where all samples possess similar pre-determined criteria related to the study (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020; Thomas, 2022). As for the word search, different keywords taken from past studies and keywords containing racial slurs related to Malaysian political themes, such as “#GE15” and “#PRU15”, were used in X’s advanced search to collect samples for this study, and these samples must be from the 1st – 31<sup>st</sup> January 2022. To protect the tweet owners' privacy and safety, profile pictures, display names and tweet handles were censored, and only the content of the tweets was analysed.

It is essential to analyse the usage context to understand the pragmatics behind using racial slurs. Table 1 shows the analysis instrument, adapted from Kaplan’s (1999) descriptive and expressive content theory and Falbo's (2021) demonstrative and weapon use of slurs theory. The instrument divides the usage of slurs into two types: Descriptive and weaponised. The descriptive use of slurs is assumed to be used without intending harm or expressing derogatory feelings towards the targeting race(s). On the other hand, the weaponised use of slurs aims to attack or offend the mentioned racial group(s). Not only would it usually convey the speaker’s attitude against a race, but it is also likely to have a negative underlying meaning in the usage. Details of the contexts are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Adapted Coding Scheme from Kaplan (1999) and Falbo (2021) for Data Analysis

Types of Use	Contexts	Coding
Descriptive	Describing the other race, whether or not it is the case (Kaplan, 1999). e.g., “Aku ada sorang kawan Keling” ( <i>I have an Indian friend</i> )	D1
	Conveying literal meaning (Kaplan, 1999). e.g. “Mata dia sepet” ( <i>Their eyes are slanted</i> )	D2
	Can be replaced with a pronoun or name of individual referred to (Falbo, 2021). e.g. “Si Sepet tu suka makan ketupat” ( <i>The slanted-eye guy/girl likes eating ketupat</i> )	D3

Weaponised	Conveying a speaker’s attitude/ emotions/feelings against the other race (Kaplan, 1999). e.g. “ <i>Meleis ni cakap macam takde akal</i> ” ( <i>These Malays speak like they have no brain</i> )	W1
	Implying underlying meanings behind the racial slur (Kaplan, 1999) e.g. “Mestilah semua tak boleh, <i>Isley</i> kan?” (Of course, nothing is permissible; it’s Islam, right?)	W2
	Conversationally inappropriate use of slurs (Falbo, 2021). e.g. “Keling ni punya video kelakar lah” (This Indian’s video is quite funny)	W3

## Findings

### Racial Slurs Used Against the Malay

The study analysed racial slurs used against the majority of races in Malaysian political tweets in terms of the types and context(s) in which the racial slurs are used. Excerpts 1-5 display tweets containing racial slurs against the Malay. The usage of the word *Isley* in Excerpt 1 is considered weaponised, where the post has an underlying meaning (W2), connoting that the Islamic value in PAS is different from the Islam that they embrace. The usage of the word *Isley* in this context not only shows the writer’s prejudice against the Muslim Malay community who supports PAS but also generalises all PAS supporters as Muslims whose Islamic belief is different from the ‘right’ one.

I respect my religion which is islam but not the 'isley' in PAS. Please learn to differentiate between those two. #PRU15

4:16 PM · Nov 21, 2022

#### Excerpt 1: Racial Slur Against Malay in W2 Category

The usage of *Isley* in Excerpt 2 is considered weaponised, which has an underlying meaning in the expression (W2). The writer was referring to the PAS supporters who worked and ‘had fun’ in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. The writer considered the supporters imposters as they would move to a city centre to make a living but go back to their hometown to vote for PAS during the election.

betul la kan. Cari duit & huha kat KL, bila balik ngundi terus isley 🤔  
mencikkkk #PRU15

[Translate Tweet](#)

8:37 AM · Nov 20, 2022 from Jalan Bakri, Johor

#### Excerpt 2: Racial Slur Against Malay in W2 Category

The usage of *meleis* in Excerpt 3 is considered weaponised in which it conveys the speaker's feelings and emotions against the Malays (W1). The writer used profanities to direct the anger against the Malays. The word 'stupid' expresses their negative emotion against the Malays, followed by a Malay curse word '*kpla buto*' which literally means dickhead. The tweet was posted with the intention to call out some racist Malays who used race and religion to gain political support, conveying their utter disappointment with some Malay community members who would resort to such an approach in politics.

Meleis is the stupidest people on planet , always wanted to escalate , perang demi bangsa dn agama kpla buto but kau , trs boleh rasict pula kat bngsa dn agama org lain nama saja stu malaysia tpi meleis rasict  
[#Malaysia](#) [#PRU15](#)

1:38 AM · Nov 23, 2022

#### Excerpt 3: Racial Slur Against Malay in W1 Category

The usage of *meleis* in Excerpt 4 is considered weaponised in which it conveys the speaker's feelings and emotions against the Malays (W1). The writer believed Muslim Malays could not move forward as a developed country. This is disrespectful and culturally insensitive towards Muslim Malays who choose to prioritise their religion and protect their beliefs. The statement made by the writer contained an essence of secularism – the ideology of separating religion and civil affairs – as compared to the Islamic view of integrating both. The use of the word *meleis* connotes the author's dissent against the Muslim Malays' belief.

The next time whenever any article like SAYS post Malaysia's rank in Worlds Most Racist Country I dun wan see comment filled with noo laa defend it laa. How extreme insecurd u meleis are to prioritize religion over development in election. Shame! [#GE15](#) [#PRU15](#) [#Undi](#)

2:44 PM · Nov 20, 2022

#### Excerpt 4: Racial Slur Against Malay in W1 Category

The usage of *meleis* in Excerpt 5 is considered as describing a racial group, whether or not it is the case (D1). This tweet was extracted from a longer thread (series of tweets) by the writer, telling a story about how political discourse was always present in Malaysia in the sense that there was constant news and coverage about the country's political scene. The context of the use was to disapprove of the word *meleis* itself due to its detriment.

Maka aku harap segala kritikan kita terhadap diri bangsa sendiri bukanlah atas dasar politik kebencian, hendak merendah-rendahkan, melemahkan semangat bangsa sendiri. (Cth: menggelar meleis, mengata Melayu malas, mengata Melayu tak tepati masa, dsbg.)

[Translate Tweet](#)

11:03 PM · Sep 3, 2022

#### Excerpt 5: Racial Slur Against Malay in D1 Category

### Racial slurs used against the Indian

Excerpts 6-10 display tweets containing racial slurs against the Indian. The usage of *paria* in Excerpt 6 is considered as describing a racial group, whether or not it is the case (D1). The writer's intention of using the word *paria* here can be considered somewhat educational. The writer made this post related to politics, aiming to educate Malaysians and increase their political literacy.

tamil tu suku bangsa india yg kebanyakan duk kat india selatan cam kerala, tamil nadu, chennai.. dalit or paria ni pula kasta, kasta tertinggi dipanggil brahma

yg dtg ke Msia kebanyakan dr selatan

[Translate Tweet](#)

9:20 PM · Nov 20, 2022

#### Excerpt 6: Racial Slur Against Indians in D1 Category

The usage of *paria* in Excerpt 7 is considered weaponised, which conveys the speaker's feelings and emotions against the Indians (W1), and it also has an underlying meaning in the expression (W2). It was a response to a news headline about a former Member of Parliament who advocated for women's rights in Afghanistan. The writer of the tweet questioned the relevance, arguing that the conflicts in the Central-Asian nation do not concern Malaysia. The clause '*paria* naik junjung' is an alteration of a Malay proverb 'kaduk naik junjung', which figuratively refers to an individual of a lower class who becomes haughty or stuck-up once given a recognition or position that brings them up the hierarchy. Therefore, the usage of the word *paria* in this post is weaponised (W1) as the writer was channeling the hatred towards the political figure and implying that the politician was someone of a lower class just because she is an Indian, indirectly invalidating her opinions because of her race (W2).

Orang Afghanistan tak kacau kau pun, yg ko sibuk dengan politik taliban tu apa hal, paria naik junjung, kirim ke qabul baru tahu 🍌  
[Translate Tweet](#)  
11:27 PM · Jan 27, 2023 · 28 Views

#### Excerpt 7: Racial Slur Against Indians in W1 & W2 Categories

The usage of *keling*, *paria* and *orang minyak* in Excerpt 8 describes a racial group, whether it is the case (D1) as the slurs were used to refer or describe a racial group. The writer expressed concern about the possible racist remarks emerging after the ending of GE15, as political figures and supporters who used the notion of racial harmony in their campaign could use racial sentiments again after garnering the votes they needed. The usage of the slurs can be considered descriptive (D1) as they were mentioned to describe the racial slurs the Indian community had to deal with for the past decades.

Ladies and gentlemen, brace yourselves, as things are about to go sideways, let's also brace ourselves for the wave of phrases such as "keling", "paria", "orang minyak", "balik india" and some other shit probably their parents thought them to use 😏  
Kudos Malaysia 🇲🇾 #PRU15  
2:10 PM · Nov 20, 2022

#### Excerpt 8: Racial Slurs Against Indians in D1 Category

**Astro AWANI** @501Awani · Oct 11, 2022  
Adakah Tun @chedetofficial akan bekerjasama dengan Datuk Seri @anwaribrahim ? Ini jawapan beliau..  
#MalaysiaMemilih



Visit [grid.astroawani.com](http://grid.astroawani.com)

120 264 334

**Keling la Tun M ni #pru15**  
5:55 PM · Oct 12, 2022

#### Excerpt 9: Racial Slur Against Indians in W2 Category

The usage of *keling* in Excerpt 9 is considered weaponised, which conveys an underlying meaning (W2). In this tweet, the writer was replying to another tweet from Astro Awani on Tun Dr Mahathir's stand in the 15th General Election, asking whether he would be joining hands with the contender from the other block. Since Tun Dr Mahathir did not provide a clear answer, uncertainty prevailed. In this context, the writer implies the difficulty in understanding Dr Mahathir's speech, suggesting he spoke "like an Indian", which is a weaponised use with an underlying meaning (W2).

The usage of *Paria* in Excerpt 10 is considered descriptive, conveying literal meaning (D2), as there was no contempt or hatred directed against the Indian community in the tweet. The author meant only to describe the hierarchical situation of a society full of corruption. The people who could not fund the campaigns or reject bribery were the ones considered as *paria*. This situation would only make the rich get richer and the poor stay or become poorer.

The root of corruption. Invest dlm politik, nnt dpt pulangan beribu kali ganda. Rakyat biasa yg takde buat sumbangan atau tak suka merasuah akan jadi rakyat kelas paria.

[Translate Tweet](#)

6:33 AM · Sep 26, 2022

Excerpt 10: Racial Slur Against Indians in D2 Categories

### **Racial Slurs Used Against the Chinese**

The use of *sepet* in Excerpt 11 is considered weaponised in conveying the speaker's feelings and emotions against the Chinese (W1). The writer expresses strong resentment towards DAP and implies that the younger generation's support for DAP might lead them to face discrimination and become slaves to the Chinese (*barua sepet*) in their own country. This viewpoint implies that the Chinese are not considered equal Malaysian citizens and should not hold leadership positions.

Yang muda muda sokong konon buat apa takut dap, all the best nanti bila dah masuk alam pekerjaan. Jadi barua sepet tu dekat tanah air sendiri.

[Translate Tweet](#)

1:46 PM · Nov 20, 2022

Excerpt 11: Racial Slur Against the Chinese in W1 Category

The usage of *Cina Sepet* in Excerpt 12 is considered to describe a racial group, whether it is or is not the case (D1); the derogatory language was employed to depict a specific racial group, the Malaysian Chi-

nese. In this tweet, the writer expressed concern about the perceived threat from Malaysian Chinese (*Cina Sepet*) governing the country than the potential invasion from China.

Takpe, orang kita tak takut negara China  
Orang lagi takut bangsa DAP MCA GERAKAN cina sepet ni takut nanti  
hilang tanah merempat kat negara sendiri kalau mereka ni perintah

Kalau China ceroboh takkan terjejas la kita, big brother kan, asalkan  
bukan bangsa cina sepet

[Translate Tweet](#)

4:32 PM · Feb 28, 2022

#### Excerpt 12: Racial Slur Against the Chinese in D1 Category

The use of *sepet* in Excerpt 13 is considered conversationally inappropriate use of slur (W3) as the writer used the word *sepet* to describe Lim, a Chinese. It is inappropriate as the tweet was crafted with sarcasm and a passive-aggressive tone, making the slur weaponised.



#### Excerpt 13: Racial Slur Against the Chinese in W3 Category

The use of *sepet* in Excerpt 14 is considered weaponised in conveying the speaker's feelings and emotions against the Chinese (W1). The writer expresses strong resentment towards the Chinese politicians,

attributing the shortage of eggs supply to the actions of certain political parties, whom he believes to be the Chinese politicians (*sepet*).



Excerpt 14: Racial Slur Against the Chinese in W1 Category

In Excerpt 15, the use of "kafir" is deemed a conversationally inappropriate slur (W3). The writer expressed their opinion on the unfolding of the GE15, foreseeing a challenging competition between Muslim Malays and non-Muslim Chinese. Due to some internalised detest of the first against the latter, the term has evolved into a derogatory racial slur when paired with a racial group's name. Consequently, the use of "kafir" in this post is considered inappropriate in the conversation, turning it into a weapon in dialogue (W3).

Pru15 ni sbnrnya perjuangan islam melayu lawan cina kafir. Kita tunggu sape yg jd kerajaan nnt.

[Translate Tweet](#)

9:39 AM · Nov 20, 2022

Excerpt 15: Racial Slur Against the Chinese in W3 Category

## Discussion

The study defines racial slurs as words that negatively describe or refer to a racial group, following Richard's (2008) definition: words with the primary purpose of hurting, menacing and subjugating people of different racial and ethnic groups. However, it also considers situations in which using racial slurs descriptively may be tolerable (but not encouraged), as suggested by Boromisza-Habashi (2007) and Diaz-Legaspe

(2019). To understand the intention and message behind these slurs, the study analyses their pragmatics, following Kaplan and Falbo's (2021) approach, which considers whether the usage is demonstrative or weaponised, depending on the context. While the study acknowledges the descriptive use of racial slurs to describe a race (D1), it disagrees with past studies that view all racial slur use as purely negative and expressive (Richard, 2008; Hedger, 2012; Camp, 2013; Hess, 2021). The study aligns with Kaplan (1999), Croom (2014), O'Dea and Saucier (2016), and Falbo (2021), emphasising that the conditions and circumstances of usage should be considered to determine whether a racial slur is descriptive or weaponised.

D1 refers to the descriptive use of racial slurs, whether accurate or not. In the analysis, four samples (Excerpts 5, 6, 8 and 12) in this category were used for educational or referential purposes, addressing the slurs rather than targeting a specific race or its members. In this context, the study aligns with Boromisza-Habashi's (2007) and Diaz-Legaspe's (2019) findings, indicating that racial slurs can be tolerable for educational purposes.

D2, involving the attempt to convey a literal meaning, only appeared in one sample (Excerpt 10). The term "*paria*" describes a social class of individuals who abstain from corruption, remaining at the bottom of the social hierarchy. As racial slurs often carry negative definitions and connotations, instances of conveying the literal meaning of a racial slur are limited.

D3 did not have any recorded instances in the study. This context involves replacing a racial slur with a pronoun or a person's name, following Falbo's theoretical framework where slurs can be used in a demonstrative manner. The absence of D3 in this study may be because of the X platform, where users are not always directly connected. It could also be the nature of political discourse, where there is often little to no personal connection between the author and the person being referred to.

W1, the first weaponised context, involves using racial slurs to express negative feelings towards another race (Excerpts 3, 4, 7, 11, 14). The writers openly directed their hatred towards the targeted race, aligning with Richard's (2018) idea that slurs carry strong intent, conveying hatred, contempt, and negativity. While this study does not view slurs as entirely expressive, Hedger's (2012) and Hess's (2021) theories of slurs being purely expressive and racist upon utterance can be applied here.

W2, the second weaponised context, is when speakers imply underlying meanings in racial slurs. Understanding these instances requires cultural background knowledge, in line with Bach's (2018) theory of loaded descriptivism. The samples (Excerpts 1, 2, 7, 9) demonstrate that even descriptive uses of slurs can have negative implicit meanings.

W3, the last context, deems the use of slurs conversationally inappropriate. In these cases, authors used racial slurs in irrelevant or unnecessary situations, where omitting the slur would not affect communication (Excerpts 13, 15). This may result from normalised use or a lack of cultural sensitivity. Some authors seem unaware that slurs can be offensive. Following Nunberg's (2018) theory of ventriloquist implicature,

speakers may use a default referential name, while others might find it heterodoxical, wrong, or disrespectful. Nunberg (2018) also highlighted the possibility of speakers being oblivious to the extent of a slur's offensiveness. In some instances, authors did not seem to care about the appropriateness of the word used in the conversation, violating the Gricean maxim of manners and leading to a pragmatic failure.

## **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This research aims to raise awareness about the impact of mindful speech and discourage the use of slurs as weapons. This can enhance pragmatic competence among Malaysian readers, helping them understand how the context and circumstances of using racial slurs can change their impact and meaning. On a national level, this study could initiate a small step toward improving cultural competence among Malaysians. While not all racial slurs are considered weaponised, the findings suggest that Malaysians could learn to carefully choose their words, opting for neutral alternatives or avoiding slurs altogether out of respect for other races. This is crucial for Malaysia's diverse society, where social and racial harmony should not be jeopardised.

More research on language use is needed to enhance social harmony and racial unity, which can impact both positively and negatively. Racial slurs are still commonly used descriptively and as weapons in daily conversations. While this study focused on racial slurs in the Malaysian political scene and their pragmatic usage, it is necessary to investigate their use in different settings. Additionally, exploring racial slurs against other races in Malaysia, like Sakai, Jakun, and Batak, would raise awareness about their harmful usage and promote cultural competence among readers in the country.

## **Author contributions**

Conceptualisation, methodology, formal analysis, and initial draft preparation by Nursyams Nadzirah Samsul Imraq; supervision, writing, review, and editing by Anealka Aziz and Maizura Mohd Noor. All authors have reviewed and approved the manuscript for publication.

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## **Data availability statement**

The dataset for this study comprises publicly available tweets retrieved from Twitter/X. As these tweets are openly accessible online, they can be obtained directly from the platform. However, any analysis or processed data generated during the study is available from the authors upon request. This study received an ethics review exemption from the university, referenced as FERC/2023/03/LG243/EX/138.

## Conflicts of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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# Unravelling the Impact of the Visible Thinking Approach on Students' Learning Experiences in a Tertiary Drama Classroom

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explored the impact of the Visible Thinking (VT) approach on students' learning experiences. It was underpinned by Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (1962, 1978) and Ritchhart's Visible Thinking (VT) approach (2006), founded by Harvard University's Project Zero (PZ). The data was collected from a focus group discussion (FGD), followed by a thematic analysis of the transcribed data. The participants were students of Communication Through Drama (EPC522), a compulsory course for the third-semester students of the LG240 programme (Bachelor of Applied Language Studies-English for Professional Communication) at the Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. The study aimed to address the lack of emphasis on developing creative and critical thinking skills in Malaysian higher education, which has led to graduates struggling with problem-solving and employability. Despite the significance of interactive and structured thinking routines, their application in higher education remains underexplored, particularly in student-centred and collaborative learning environments. This research sought to fill this gap by investigating the effectiveness of the VT routines in enhancing interactive discussions and fostering higher-order thinking in a Malaysian university drama classroom. The findings revealed the positive impact and the feasibility of implementing the VT routine. Despite the challenges of conducting drama activities online, students embraced this new educational experience, creating a more interactive and student-centred environment. These results also demonstrated how drama activities integrated with the VT routine can enhance students' interactive roles, thinking and communication skills, aligning with the Malaysian Higher Education Blueprint (2013–2025), which emphasises students' mastery of communication and thinking skills to meet future demands.

**Keywords:** *Visible Thinking, Project Zero, Social Constructivist, Thinking Routines, Drama Classroom*

## Introduction

As an educational tool, drama requires direct human involvement and engagement, through which creative and critical thinking skills are highly encouraged. As Bsharat (2021) aptly mentioned, learners engaging in drama recognise the significance of communication and concentration, as drama can only be done in a meaningful interactional context. Alasmari (2020) views drama as a teaching tool that stimulates the “whole brain” and activates various types of intelligence. It thus targets students who need a challenge, as well as students who cannot be reached through conventional teaching methods. Due to the pandemic, drama classroom instructors and students faced a new challenge to look into online resources for drama interactions. In addition to learning how to utilise digital pedagogy successfully, drama teachers started to consider more deeply how digital media may make drama more educational (Karaosmanoğlu et al., 2022). Since the data

was collected during the ongoing Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode due to the government's enforcement of MCO (Movement Control Order), examining the manifestation of the VT approach in a virtual environment was a timely response. However, regardless of the learning modes, the study's findings will still be relevant for future drama education because the focus was on integrating VT routines within the DE activities, which is applicable in both online and physical settings.

This study attempted to adhere to the demand for mastery of thinking skills in higher education by integrating Project Zero's VT routines in drama classroom activities. For instance, creating storyboards and coping with the hindrance of online drama activities while applying VT routines can provide practical, hands-on experiences that develop these crucial skills. Since its foundation in 1967, Project Zero has created numerous thinking routines, each with various activities for educators worldwide. Currently, 83 VT routines are available for educators, allowing them to maintain professional autonomy and tailor them to fit their students' needs and educational environments (Kloosterman, 2024). One of these was selected to be applied in this study, i.e. the Ladder of Feedback (LoF). The two research questions addressed were:

1. How does the VT routine impact students' experiences in the virtual drama classroom?
2. To what extent is the Visible Thinking approach applicable in the Malaysian tertiary drama classroom?

## **Literature Review**

### **Social Constructivism and the Demand for Enhanced Thinking Skills**

Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025) states that the 21st-century learning orientation is on developing learners as autonomous and all-rounder individuals. Its emphasis is on enhancing critical and creative thinking skills and a collaborative learning environment, within which interaction plays an integral part. This adheres to the social constructivist principles. Social constructivism is a teaching approach that emphasises student participation, discussion, and sharing. It incorporates various groupings and interactive strategies, including whole-class conversations, small-group discussions, and paired student engagements. These activities advocate thinking by encouraging students to share ideas, brainstorm solutions, identify cause-and-effect relationships, solve problems, or expand their existing knowledge base (Noor Al-Qaysi et al., 2021).

Thinking creatively and critically is crucial because it enables individuals to view problems and situations innovatively. Anjarwati et al. (2018), Atmojo and Sajidan (2020), and Azid and Md-Ali (2020) note that thinking critically, which correlates to creative thinking, enables people to solve problems with a wide range of solutions. Integrating different situations quickly and generating various ideas when faced with problems are vital benefits of strong thinking skills. Many employees wish they had been exposed to creative thinking during their education since creativity, which relies on accumulated information, is not instan-

taneous (Mahmud & Wong, 2022). Moreover, the ability to think creatively allows individuals to generate multiple solutions to problems, enhancing their problem-solving capabilities. This is crucial in the workplace, where providing constructive ideas can make a significant difference.

However, the development of students' creative thinking skills has received limited attention, resulting in many graduates struggling to secure job opportunities due to a lack of creativity (Wyse & Ferrari, 2014). Despite the importance of thinking skills in academic and professional success, Malaysian higher education often falls short of fostering these abilities; some scholars argue that the current educational system stifles creativity because it lacks a focus on teaching and applying new information to foster creative problem-solving skills (Mahmud & Wong, 2022). The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology poses another challenge to sustaining genuine human thinking in classroom activities. AI tools, like ChatGPT, may simplify interactive processes, reducing opportunities for students to engage in authentic social interactions. Hence, more room for natural human interactions involving thought-provoking activities should be created in educational settings to balance AI's domination in various aspects of life. As stressed by Water (2021), it is crucial to encourage natural interactive routines, emphasising the thinking process within a social context.

### **Project Zero and the Visible Thinking Approach**

Visible Thinking (VT), developed by Harvard University academics and teachers globally, is part of Project Zero (PZ), established by Nelson Goodman in 1967 to improve education. VT, a core PZ project by Ron Ritchhart (2006), integrates students' thinking development with content learning across subjects. Project Zero's VT is a relatively new concept within the field of education. Articles and research projects exploring the concept of making thinking visible began to appear in educational journals in the early 2000s. VT is generally defined as a "broad and flexible framework for enriching classroom learning" (Visible Thinking, Introduction, 2016). Research conducted to explore VT arose after educational studies found that skills and abilities alone are not enough to cement knowledge and learning for students. Learning is more apt to happen when content is addressed with alertness and positive attitudes on the part of the students (Visible Thinking, Introduction, 2016). Ritchhart and Church (2020) identify six ways thinking routine practices transform classrooms: fostering deep learning, engaging students, changing student and teacher roles, enhancing formative assessment, improving learning, and developing thinking dispositions. PZ has created numerous thinking routines, each with various activities for educators worldwide in which interaction becomes the focal element, aligning with social constructivism

The Ladder of Feedback (LoF) routine guides interactive discussions by proposing specific language functions (Project Zero, n.d.). This routine (Figure 1) was introduced and described to the students before starting the DE stages (Figure 2) as stipulated in the EPC522 syllabus. Since VT promotes making the thinking process "visible" and documenting the results of thinking, it can be likened to students' group interac-

tions in preparing the storyboard (DE Stage 1). The study attempted to gauge the students' insights into making thinking a conscious routine by explicitly applying the proposed LoF language structures in discussing their storyboards for their movie adaptation assessment. The results of their thinking were made visible by documenting them in the form of PowerPoint presentations.

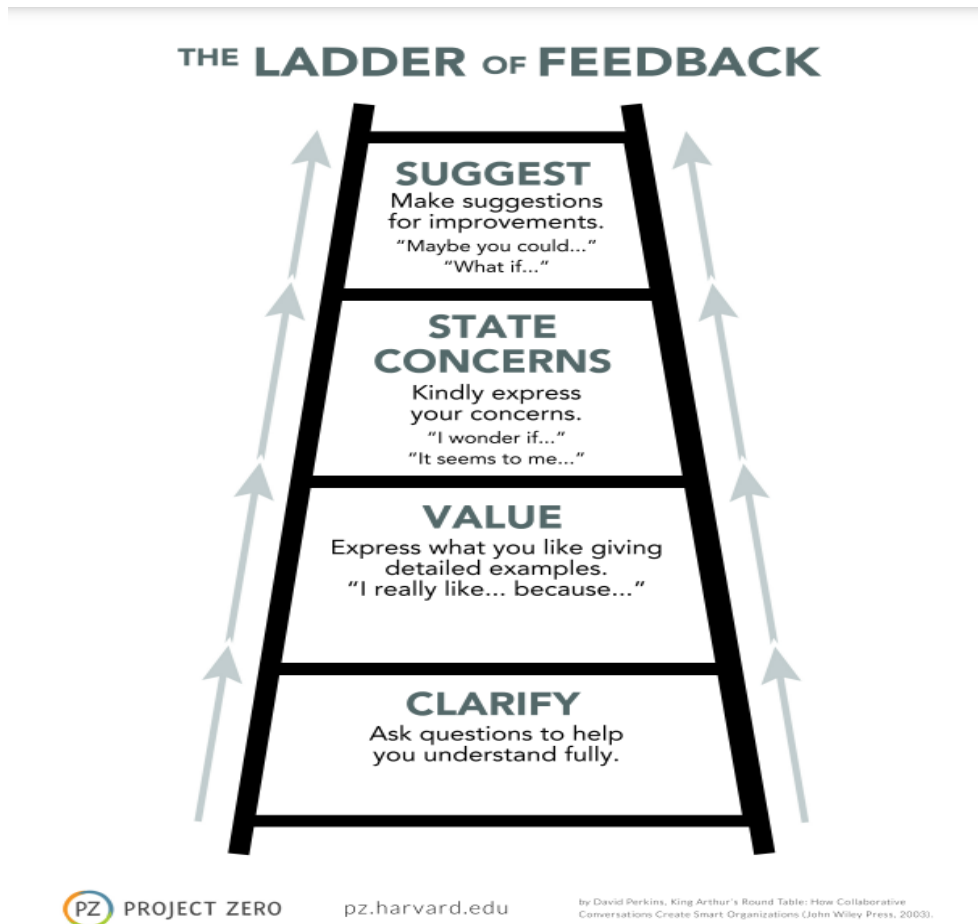


Figure 1: The Ladder of Feedback VT routine, Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education

According to a study by Gholam (2018), thinking routines in higher education encourage students to employ cooperation, communication skills, and higher-order thinking, boosting student participation in every learning process. The exercises can be incorporated into several lessons, and the students learn from one another. Many students claimed to have synthesised, examined, reflected and expanded their thinking (Gholam, 2018). Most studies about thinking routines have been carried out in a few areas, such as early childhood and higher education. Some studies focused on how thinking routines enhance thinking skills, including critical thinking skills in elementary school (Manurung et al., 2022). Thus, there is a need for more discussion about the impact of thinking routines on students of higher levels.

Stages	Proposed Interactive Group Activities
1	<b>Planning and Outlining</b> (Adapting an existing script for classroom dramatisation) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selecting movie/drama for script adaptation</li> <li>• Justifying the choice</li> <li>• Discussing the adapted version</li> <li>• Completing the storyboard</li> <li>• Presenting the storyboard</li> <li>• Getting approval</li> </ul>
2	<b>Playing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sharing of the material to be dramatised (reading/telling/choral reading)</li> <li>- Trying-on (brief encounter of life as the character and finding elements of voice and body that work in portraying the character)</li> <li>- Dramatisation (developing the theme through dramatic actions)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparing adapted script</li> <li>• Writing the script</li> <li>• Casting/Delegating roles</li> <li>• Discussing the characters</li> <li>• Arrangement of scenes/acts/climax/plot twist</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
3	<b>Evaluation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reflective analysis of learning experience (discussion of personal reactions, the content and theme, and how to extend experience/skills to other real-world situations and circumstances)</li> <li>- Discussion and evaluation of initial dramatisation of an adapted script in Stage 2</li> </ul> <b>Workshop (Rehearsal)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dramatisation of play based on an adapted script</li> <li>• Critique session, discussion and evaluation of performances.</li> </ul>
4	<b>Replay</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continuous enactment from previous stages.</li> <li>- Students incorporate new materials or changes in acts/scenes (if any) obtained from further reading, observation or new ideas.</li> <li>- Discussion of play based on an adapted script.                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rehearsing the script</li> <li>• Reading aloud (verbal and non-verbal expressions)</li> <li>• Discussing props, costumes, music</li> <li>• Discussing technical aspects of shooting for final drama production.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Figure 2: The Drama Exploration (DE) Stages based on EPC522 Syllabus

## Methodology

### Research Design

Suiting its objectives, the study is qualitative in its design. Creswell (2018) states that qualitative research is a method for examining and evaluating the interpretations that individuals or groups make of a social or human situation; in the context of this study: students' interaction in the drama classroom. Data collected in the participant's surroundings, data analysis that progresses inductively from details to general themes, and the researcher's interpretations of the data are all components of the research process, as are emerging questions and procedures (Creswell, 2018).

### Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through a focus group discussion (FGD). The instrument, a set of questions to gauge students' insights, was developed based on the research questions and the underpinning theories.

Students were briefed on the steps of the LoF VT routine (Figure 1) to be applied in any part of the DE stages. The FGD was conducted via Google Meet after the completion of the group interactive activities involving the four stages of Drama Exploration (DE) as stipulated in the course syllabus.

### **Sampling**

Employing purposeful sampling, the sample comprised 19 UiTM undergraduates of the Communication Through Drama (EPC522) course. In qualitative research, the concept of purposeful sampling enables the researcher to select individuals who can contribute to an understanding of the central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2003, 2007, 2008; Patton, 2015). Sampling for qualitative research focuses on selecting information-rich cases to supply a complete and sophisticated view of a phenomenon from various angles (Liamputtong, 2007). The number of respondents required is very much dependent on the purpose of the study (Kvale, 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

The FGD was recorded and transcribed verbatim for a thematic analysis, assisted by Nvivo-14. Excerpts from the transcribed FGD supported the analysis of findings, which were discussed based on underpinning theories and relevant literature.

### **Limitations**

Gauging the insights from one group of students in a particular setting may be seen as a limitation. However, it is crucial to note that being qualitative in its design, the study provides an in-depth description of this specific scope to meet its objectives rather than aiming for generalisation to a larger population. As emphasised by Patton (2015), qualitative data collection prioritises the depth and richness of information over the number of participants, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under study. Another limitation of this study is its reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias, where participants provide responses they perceive as favourable rather than fully candid insights (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Focus group discussions, in particular, may amplify this tendency due to group dynamics, as students might conform to dominant opinions rather than express differing perspectives (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Furthermore, self-reported data may not always accurately reflect students' actual engagement or cognitive processes, as individuals may struggle to articulate their thinking explicitly (Patton, 2015). To mitigate these limitations, the researcher initially urged the students to respond honestly, emphasising the significance of their genuine insights to improve the drama course and ensuring their confidentiality. The study also triangulated findings with direct excerpts from verbatim transcripts to ensure authenticity and transparency in data interpretation. Additionally, the research instruments were validated by two experts in

the field with PhD qualifications and extensive teaching experience to ensure the questions adequately captured the intended concepts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). The use of mechanical recording (Google Meet video recordings) further enhanced reliability by allowing for accurate data verification and minimising observational bias (Maxwell, 2016).

## Findings and Discussion

Having applied the LoF thinking routine in the DE stages, it emerged as a critical component discussed by the participants in the FGD. Two main themes and several sub-themes were derived from the thematic analysis of the students' FGD responses, assisted by Nvivo-14. The categorisations were based on the RQs used to guide the coding of the FGD responses. Table 1 shows each theme with its corresponding RQ and categorisations, the number of files (two to represent the two focused areas in the transcription), and the number of references (to show the frequency of mentions in the FGD). The following discussion will be evidenced by extracts from the FGD transcriptions (students' names were replaced by pseudonyms S1, S2, etc. for confidentiality) and discussed in relation to underpinning theories and literature.

Table 1: Impact and Applicability of VT Routines (Themes 1 and 2)

	<b>Categorisation of the Emerging Themes</b>	<b>Files</b>	<b>References</b>
RQ1	<i>How does applying the VT routine impact students' experiences in the virtual drama classroom?</i>	2	60
Theme 1	Impact of the VT Routine	4	40
1.1	Clarity of Tasks	2	2
1.2	Cohesion and Coherence	2	3
1.3	Confidence and Communication Skills	2	3
1.4	Language Formality & Politeness	2	5
1.5	Encouraging Thinking Aloud	4	4
1.6	Documenting and Visualising Thinking Results	2	4
1.7	Developing Critical and Creative Thinking	2	4
1.8	Planning and Organisation	1	2
1.9	Problem-solving and Decision-making	2	7
1.10	Teamwork and Collaboration	2	5

Categorisation of the Emerging Themes		Files	References
RQ2	<i>To what extent is the Visible Thinking approach applicable in the Malaysian tertiary drama classroom?</i>	2	40
Theme 2	The Applicability of the VT Routine	2	9
2.1	Online & Physical Interactions	2	5
2.2	Suitability to different levels of study	2	2
2.3	Flexibility	1	1
2.4	Subjects other than Drama	1	1

### Theme 1: The Impact of the LoF VT Routines

This first theme generated from the thematic analysis consisted of 10 sub-themes, as follows:

#### *Theme 1.1: Clarity of Tasks*

Students found that using the LoF method clarified their project completion process, enabling them to express opinions freely and better understand the necessary information:

*Yes, these steps of LoF have made each process in completing the project clearer, I would say. It certainly gave us the flow to allow ourselves to express each of our opinions freely, and following the necessary information gathered, it gave us to have more clarity in what we wanted to deliver in the project.* (S1)

*I think the method has helped our discussion to achieve better clarity, and it was very much easier for us to communicate as a team through the LoF method. And also, I think that the directions of our discussions were very clear because we followed the sequence every single meeting, and we were able to quickly come to a conclusion.* (S2)

This aligns with the principles of the Visible Thinking approach, which emphasises clarity in thinking and communication. When students follow the LoF sequence, it guides them to express their thoughts clearly, enhancing their understanding of the project's objectives: Students use thinking routines to discover, talk about, record, and administer their thinking, making thinking a visible feature of the classroom (Ritchhart & Church, 2020). These routines are essential for thoughtful learning and promote metacognition, helping students become more aware of their thinking processes" (Ritchhart et al., 2011). From a social constructivist perspective, clear communication among students and educators is vital for the construction of practical knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978).

### ***Theme 1.2: Cohesion and Coherence***

Students mentioned that the LoF routine improved their flow of discussions by encouraging politeness, gratitude for sharing ideas, and practical suggestions. It prevented lengthy meetings and guided discussions to quick conclusions:

*I think in terms of the flow of discussion, it went really well because I remember that we used the LoF method, where we would thank each other for giving our opinions or for sharing their ideas. And then, I remember the other group members would come up with suggestions.* (S2)

*I think our meetings rarely ever got lengthy, so for me that's how I see um the LOF method impact our flow of discussion.* (S3)

*I feel like having this LoF really organised our flow of discussion. If not, it's going to be like randomly jumbled thoughts, suggestions, and questions, so having this really helps guide us to a conclusion to all questions and concerns.* (S1)

Cohesion and coherence in discussions are essential components of Visible Thinking. These elements enhance the effectiveness of group discussions and align with the principles of the VT approach (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000). In social constructivism, meaningful interactions and the collaborative construction of knowledge are promoted (Vygotsky, 1978). These features also align with collaborative learning principles, emphasising effective group interactions and mutual support (Slavin, 1996). In cooperative learning, cohesion and coherence are essential for effective group processes (Johnson et al., 1994a).

### ***Theme 1.3: Confidence and Communication Skills***

Students reported that LoF improved their confidence and communication skills by fostering a supportive environment that encouraged them to express ideas and complement one another regardless of perceived quality:

*Personally, yes it did improve my confidence and communication skills because I believe that it allows me to identify my strengths and weaknesses, especially when I receive helpful suggestions and clarifications from my team members that also allows me to improve any of my shortcomings, and also vice versa.* (S4)

*For me, personally, I always have the most worries every time there's an idea-sharing session because I tend to get insecure with my own ideas. Sometimes I get scared to give my ideas because I think they're not as good as the ideas given by others, but the LoF method it somehow*

*taught us to encourage one another to speak up and also to complement each other regardless of the idea that we threw in, and I think that really helped me to become more confident.*

(S3)

Developing confidence and communication skills is fundamental to Visible Thinking (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000). The LoF method creates an environment where students feel secure expressing their thoughts, leading to improvements in confidence and communication skills. This adheres with the principle of social constructivism, which emphasises the role of social interactions in fostering cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Besides, this demonstrates collaborative learning principles, where students learn through social interactions, building confidence and communication skills (Bruffee, 1993). Cooperative learning similarly highlights the role of social interactions in improving confidence and communication (Johnson et al., 1994a). Encouraging students to overcome insecurities and speak up, the LoF routine also promotes learner-centredness, empowering students to take ownership of their learning and express themselves (Weimer, 2002).

#### ***Theme 1.4: Language Formality and Politeness***

The participants stated that using LoF led to a combination of formal and informal language, maintaining professionalism during discussions. It encouraged politeness and constructive handling of disagreements:

*As for language used, since all of us are friends, we could freely be casual with each other; however, when it comes to communicating professionally, we somehow ended up being formal with each other to set the tone of every LoF process smoother.*

(S1)

*Okay, in my opinion, I think the LOF method helps in guiding students to a more polite discussion, where as I remember, in terms of disagreement, instead of completely disregarding the idea or opinion given, I remember we came up with a better suggestion that elevates the idea or opinion.*

(S3)

This influence on language formality and the emphasis on professional communication align with research on classroom discourse, where language use significantly impacts the classroom environment (Nystand, 2018). Politeness strategies are part of effective classroom communication (Gardner, 2001). The balance between formal and informal language use indicates an awareness of context and audience, a vital aspect of the Visible Thinking approach (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000). As important as the realisation that talk is necessary for classroom teaching, Cazden (2001) discusses the importance of learners acquiring the discourse relevant to the discipline. She differentiates classroom discourses from the informal talk students engage in outside of school; the more significant the difference between the two, the greater the effort need-

ed to enable students to learn the new role. Politeness and constructive discourse are crucial for effective collaboration in a social constructivist learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

### ***Theme 1.5: Encouraging Thinking Aloud***

It was gathered from the FGDs that the LoF routine and DE stages involving reading aloud had improved brainstorming, idea sharing, and open discussion among the students, allowing idea expressions and collaborative idea development:

*In Stages 4 and 3, we had to read aloud, and especially in Stage 4, where we had to discuss the costumes, the background music, and, you know, read the script. I think those stages are definitely beneficial because in each stage, we learned something.* (S4)

*From what we have all experienced by applying LoF, I think, by a process of discussion, it's where you actually just throw out ideas, and the moment that we are allowed to actually say anything, to actually just, you know, by thinking aloud, the idea might not be filtered yet, so you discuss it with your friends and what not, and I think it is one of the ways that it has affected us.* (S1)

*At first, when we just wrote the description whatsoever on our own, we didn't, like, really voice it out, but when we do the script reading together we can notice like "oh here's there's something lacking here", and like, "here we should add this", and then oh, this part "maybe it's a bit off, maybe we should like change it" and then we add another part to make sure that the flow is aligned with the story according to the storyboard.* (S2)

Encouraging thinking aloud is a central feature of visible thinking, promoting open, unfiltered expression of ideas (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000). Students' recognition of the benefits of "thinking aloud" by applying LoF proves this statement. VT promotes thinking by creating opportunities and making students' thinking visible, using strategies such as thinking routines (Ritchhart et al., 2006). The LoF method facilitates this process with structured language functions for students to use in discussing and voicing their thoughts. From a social constructivist perspective, open discussion and collaborative idea development are critical elements of knowledge construction through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Encouraging thinking aloud through the LoF routine also reflects the collaborative learning approach, which emphasises group discussions and collective idea development (Dillenbourg, 1999). It also aligns with cooperative learning, where students share and exchange ideas to improve their collective understanding (Johnson et al., 1994a). Encouraging students to voice their thoughts openly and unfiltered is also fundamental to classroom discourse, as it promotes active and interactive learning (Seedhouse, 2010).

### ***Theme 1.6: Developing Critical and Creative Thinking***

The participants agreed that applying the LoF structure encourages them to adapt and customise it to enhance their critical thinking skills. It helps stimulate critical and creative thinking:

*It's a responsibility for each one of us to express our thoughts and I think LoF would be a good way to start the students to have even better skills in critical thinking and also soft skills.*  
(S1)

*I believe that if you have this kind of Ladder of Feedback structure in the discussion, it will really help you become more skillful in communicating and make you a critical thinker too.*  
(S2)

Developing critical and creative thinking aligns with the goals of the Visible Thinking approach, which emphasises thinking skills (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000). The LoF structure provides a framework that supports this development. This aligns with the results of a study by Gholam (2018), which found that thinking routines in higher education encourage students to employ cooperation, communication skills, and higher-order thinking, boosting student participation in every learning process. The exercises might be incorporated into several lessons, and the students might learn from one another. Many students claimed to have synthesised, examined, reflected and expanded their thinking (Gholam, 2018). Social constructivism sees social interactions and collaborative learning experiences as catalysts for critical thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). Collaborative learning focuses on critical thinking as students engage in dialogues, share perspectives, and analyse information collaboratively (Panitz, 2019). In addition, cooperative learning promotes the development of critical thinking skills through interaction and discourse (Johnson et al., 1994b).

### ***Theme 1.7: Documenting and Visualising Thinking Results***

Thinking routines, documentation of student thinking, and reflective professional practice are emphasised to create a culture of thinking and learning (Ritchhart et al., 2011). As the participants stated, the LoF routine facilitated thinking-aloud practice and enabled them to document and visualise the results of their thinking. It improved the clarity of ideas and aided in brainstorming.

*Yes, I agree that LoF is good for thinking aloud practice and also in documenting the results of our thinking because from our group discussion we actually do come up with storyboard and script...having LoF really is helpful with the thoughts like visual and written forms, because when we say it out loud we hear it better, we understand it better, so we know what to add and what not to add.*  
(S5)

*We used WhatsApp mostly to communicate and share ideas about the plots we had planned. Of course, we shared a Google document so we could go through our script and how we would edit the video since we were doing this completely online. So, if we were to edit anything, we had to do it in unity, I think. We had to reassure everyone that we could come to a conclusion on how to do things together.* (S6)

*So I think from the story board that we did as a collaborative process, a lot of thinking was involved in terms of developing, visualising and documenting whatever things that we needed to improve or we could do better. When it comes to our emotions and acting them out, I think the SB definitely helped us.* (S4)

Documenting and visualising thinking results are central to Visible Thinking (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000). The LoF method enhances these processes based on students' reflections. In the social constructivist framework, documenting and visualising ideas can lead to shared understanding and knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978).

### ***Theme 1.8: Planning and Organisation***

The participants recognised the importance of planning and organisation throughout the process. They learned that following a structured plan is crucial for effective discussions. The introduction of the DE stages was particularly appreciated because it encouraged more ideas and valuable inputs, preventing discussions from being limited to a single idea:

*Throughout the process, I learned that planning is important. Planning and following the plan to make it very organised is the most important part.* (S3)

*I am really grateful to the four stages because I realised that my group was able to produce more ideas and useful input throughout the discussions. Without the four stages, we would just be stuck with one idea, and then we would have only a few ideas here and there.* (S4)

The structured nature of LoF integrated into the DE stages encouraged students to think critically about the tasks at hand, helping them to map out their goals and achieve a clear direction for their discussions. This task aligns with the promotion of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL). Classroom tasks should be designed to foster a sense of self-worth for SRL; students who are optimistic about their ability to pick up SRL skills will be more determined regarding devoting time and energy to self-regulation (Schunk & Miller, 2002). Challenging and exciting classroom activities should include SRL; Randi and Corno (2000) imply that teachers should design classroom activities that demonstrate the use of SRL skills and involve using them (in this context, discussing and creating a storyboard for a movie adaptation guided by the LoF and DE

stages). This should be followed up with questions (feedback and scaffolding by the lecturer) requiring students to think of how to improve the planning and how an objective could be reached.

### ***Theme 1.9: Problem-solving and Decision-making***

Problem-solving and decision-making are fundamental educational skills, particularly emphasised in collaborative and cooperative learning theories. During the FGD, students discussed how the DE stages integrated with the LoF routine assisted them in addressing challenges and making decisions together. They highlighted several instances where problem-solving and decision-making were central to the discussion. They mentioned technical issues during video recording, challenges related to the script, and the need to decide on the best ending and plot twists:

*I would say that the activities that required us to solve problems were in stage 4 where we discussed how exactly to record the video. Unfortunately, we had a lot of mishaps recording it, but we solved a lot of things, and we went through everything. Thank God we managed. There was one time where we wanted to do a separate Google Meet session where everyone did their own scene, but apparently because of some hiccups and technical problems here and there required us to think for options and we needed to solve the problem.* (S6)

*For the problem-solving, in the final stage, we had to discuss the angles of how we were going to record our scenes. We had to solve this because we wanted to make the scenes look like the characters were there and talking with each other, which I think was quite challenging. After all, if we were together the angles and the talking part would be more realistic and satisfying because we actually had the person we wanted to talk with in front of us. But despite all those hardships, I think it's a fun experience and I've gained a lot from this course.* (S5)

*I feel that in a way, all of the four stages of dramatisation require us to solve problems, but by the end of the stages, which required us to replay and revise our script, we revised on what are we going to do, what kind of actions and intonations we should put on, all required solving problems under some circumstances.* (S1)

In collaborative learning, the participants' discussion reflects the collaborative nature of problem-solving and decision-making within a group. Through group interactions, collaborative learning advocates shared problem-solving and knowledge creation (Bruffee, 1999). The LoF routine serves as a scaffold for this collaborative problem-solving process, guiding students in addressing issues they encounter during their projects. The decision-making process reflects how students critically think about the most suitable options. This demonstrates that the LoF method enhances critical and creative thinking, as highlighted in the learner-centred theory. This resonates with the social constructivist approach that encourages learners to consider

others' opinions and study fresh ideas from peers and instructors, fostering a collaborative learning environment (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

### ***Theme 1.10: Teamwork and Collaboration***

The participants emphasised the importance of teamwork and collaboration in implementing the LoF in the DE process. They expressed their positive experiences and reflections on collaboration, indicating that teamwork is vital in achieving successful learning outcomes:

*Since we're working towards the same goal, it's easy to, you know, work together to get the best result using the LoF.* (S2)

*Somehow, despite being away from the other members, I can still manage to contribute, and it seems like we all work together without any problems at all, even though there were a bit of shortcoming on my part back then, so that's my answer to that question.* (S1)

*I think from the storyboard that we did as a collaborative process, a lot of thinking was involved in terms of developing, visualising and documenting whatever things that we needed to improve or we could do better when it comes to our emotions and acting them out, I think the SB definitely helped us.* (S3)

*Also, teamwork, agreeing, and accepting each other's opinions. You can give your opinions, but if your opinion is not fitting or suitable, you must accept it, go to another meeting, and discuss it again until it all becomes agreeable and good to go.* (S4)

Teamwork and collaboration, as evident in the drama classroom, resonate with several educational theories and concepts. Vygotsky's SCT asserts the importance of social interaction and collaborative learning. It highlights how students actively engage with their peers to construct knowledge collectively (Vygotsky, 1978). Cooperative learning theories, such as those outlined by Johnson (1989), highlight the benefits of students working together in a structured and interdependent manner. The students' descriptions of working toward a common goal and accepting each other's opinions align with the cooperative learning framework. Learner-centred approaches, as discussed by Weimer (2002), emphasise tailoring learning experiences to the needs and preferences of the students. In this case, students engage in active, collaborative learning where they have a say in the process. Besides, effective communication and cooperation are vital components of productive classroom discourse (Lewis, 2019). The successful collaboration is evident through positive classroom discourse and interactions.

## Theme 2: The Applicability of LoF VT Routine

### Theme 2.1: Online and Physical Interactions

The following students acknowledged the applicability of LoF in both online and physical interactions:

*I believe that the Ladder of Feedback can be applicable in various communication contexts, including both online and face-to-face.* (S1)

*The language used in this process is generally straightforward; for instance, in online discussions, the Ladder of Feedback can be applied to written comments, discussion in virtual chats, or even in video meetings, whereas in face-to-face discussions, it can be implemented through verbal communication.* (S2)

*LOF consists of simple steps and practical language structures that can be applicable both in online and face-to-face discussions because people usually struggle with um having meetings or discussions online due to technical problems such as connection, and then we losing like members whenever like they're trying to talk, but I feel like with having LOF it really helps online.* (S6)

*I think it is better if it is applied to face-to-face discussions because even in a small group or bigger group, having LoF applied will make the discussion more emphasised and more reachable in whatever that we are reaching to the goal.* (S5)

To reflect on the above responses, participants highlighted that the LoF is versatile and practical in various communication contexts, including online and face-to-face interactions. They agreed that the structured steps and explicit language used in LoF made it suitable for written comments, virtual chats, video meetings, and verbal communication. Applying LoF in both settings aids in overcoming challenges associated with online discussions, such as technical issues and connectivity problems. The approach to LoF remains consistent, whether students interact virtually or in a physical classroom. LoF's adaptability in both contexts ensures that drama students can maintain the benefits of social constructivism regardless of the mode of instruction. This is particularly relevant in the post-COVID-19 era, where institutions opted for online learning as a part of most courses, including Communication Through Drama in UiTM.

This applicability of LoF in different communication contexts aligns with the principles of social constructivism, as Vygotsky's theory emphasises the social nature of learning. It promotes collaborative learning and peer interactions, which can occur in diverse settings, reinforcing that knowledge is constructed through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of Collaborative Learning, the participants' discussion about the LoF's applicability in various communication contexts reflects how collaborative learning

can occur through different interaction modes, promoting shared knowledge construction and meaningful dialogue (Bruffee, 1999).

### ***Theme 2.2: Suitability to Different Levels of Studies***

The applicability of LoF in terms of its suitability to different levels of studies was discussed by students, as in the following excerpts:

*We can say that for school students, this method can be applied to them, however maybe the teachers need to monitor them more closely in order for them to understand the methods correctly, because we can agree that LoF and DE are actually helping the students or children at school to actually demonstrate their creative skills, and if they can follow these methods correctly, they can actually find out themselves, that they are actually creative in creating their own solutions or discussion.”* (S5)

*“So, it helps a lot and it should be applied in every level of students, no matter if it's a diploma, degree or even master.”* (S5)

*Yeah, I think it can be helpful for all levels of the students. all right. It's just a matter of whether you want to ask them to strictly use the given structure or you want to have some flexibility to it.* (S3)

Regarding whether LoF is suitable for different levels of study, it can be implied from the responses above that the students suggested a balanced approach. While university-level students can adapt and customise the learning structure, it is essential to strike a balance when applying this routine to students at various educational levels, such as schools. It may require closer teacher monitoring to ensure school students understand the method correctly. They emphasised that the LoF and DE stages could help students, even children, to demonstrate their creative skills and problem-solving abilities. These methods empower students to find innovative solutions and engage in meaningful discussions. This viewpoint supports the idea that Vygotsky's theory is adaptable and can be applied across different educational contexts and levels of students with the necessary adjustments. Active participation of students in their learning process resonates with the learner-centred approach. The LoF and DE methods encourage students to take ownership of their discussions and decisions. Applying these methods at various education levels aligns with learner-centredness (Vygotsky, 1978).

### ***Theme 2.3: Flexibility of the teacher's role***

The teacher's flexibility to adjust the instructions accordingly and monitor the process of applying the routine was emphasised. In the initial stages of discussions, teachers may actively participate. However, as stu-

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dents become more adept at using LoF within the group activities, teachers can step back and monitor from a distance:

*For teachers at school, after they observe that the children can actually apply these LoF methods themselves, then maybe the teachers can slowly let their students to have their own group discussion. So, yes, that means like maybe for the first three stages of discussion the teachers can be with the students and maybe for the next discussions, the teachers can just monitor from far away, right, while doing the methods.* (S5)

This student's reflection highlights the critical role of flexibility in a teacher's approach, particularly when transitioning students from guided learning to more independent, self-directed learning. By gradually reducing the teacher's direct involvement and increasing students' autonomy, the teacher facilitates a natural progression from dependence to independence. This aligns with the core ideas of social constructivist pedagogy, where learners actively build knowledge through interaction and reflection rather than passive reception. The use of VT routines in this process is essential because these routines help students internalise cognitive strategies. Initially, the teacher plays a crucial role in modelling these thinking routines, guiding students through the processes, and providing structure. However, as students master the methods and demonstrate their ability to apply them independently, the teacher can start withdrawing from direct facilitation. The gradual reduction of the teacher's presence reflects scaffolding—a concept rooted in Vygotsky's SCT. Scaffolding and individual thinking processes are key aspects of the Vygotskian theory, which PZ researchers focus on (Ritchhart et al., 2006). Teachers should promote critical thinking by creating opportunities and making students' thinking visible, asking open-ended questions and peer questioning, using strategies such as thinking routines and scaffolding (Ritchhart et al., 2006). Scaffolding allows students to work within their zone of proximal development (ZPD), where they receive just enough support to accomplish tasks they couldn't complete independently, but as they improve, the support is gradually removed. This approach is also consistent with the principles of collaborative and cooperative learning. It allows students to gradually take on more responsibility and leadership roles in their education, fostering independence and critical thinking (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

#### ***Theme 2.4: Subjects other than drama***

LoF was also seen as applicable to subjects other than drama, particularly when group work is involved. As confessed by A2-1, applying LoF would have significantly improved her group presentations on another subject, citing a specific example from a recent protocol subject related to *baju kurung* clothing presentations:

*I would like to take this one subject that I took last semester which is on Protocol, so we had this presentation where we needed to discuss, we needed to present on clothing. So, when it comes to that presentation of clothing baju kurung, we really have to know the details of it, like what's accessory, what about the colour, what about the material, so by having the LoF we can really organise our presentation better, like during our discussion in giving parts, so for example, you can suggest or you can add accessories in the presentation even though it's not mentioned as baju kurung, but you know just for, like, just a suggestion and the other members being appreciative of that can also help out. LOF can also help with the questions and concerns, like, okay, what if this is not like the exact baju kurung that is proper traditionally, so having this structure would really help, not just only for this subject, I believe in every subject that involves discussion within members. (S2)*

The adaptability of LoF to diverse subjects aligns with the idea that constructive learning can occur in various domains. Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism suggests that the learning process is not confined to specific subjects but can be applied across disciplines, emphasising the transferability of cognitive skills (Vygotsky, 1978). Public and private schools from the United States, the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, and Australia have participated in Project Zero's Visible Thinking programme, conducted in settings ranging from elementary to college levels. They investigated the applicability of employing thinking routines and documentation as teaching tools in the classroom, created a framework for achieving cultural transformation in the classroom and schools and designed tools for incorporating the arts (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008).

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Addressing RQ1, the findings demonstrated that applying the LoF routine in the DE stages significantly impacted students' learning experiences, enhancing clarity, cohesion, confidence, communication skills, critical and creative thinking, and collaborative problem-solving. As described under Theme 1, it fostered a supportive and organised environment, promoting professional communication and teamwork. The lecturer's scaffolding role was regarded crucial in guiding students and ensuring successful learning outcomes, corresponding to the VT and social constructivist principles. As reflected by the students, the LoF routine integrated into the structured DE stages effectively facilitated thoughtful and collaborative learning experiences. Addressing RQ2, the analysis of Theme 2 reflects the practicality of the VT routine in both online and physical interactions. Students noted its straightforward language and structured steps, which facilitate effective communication in various settings, aiding in overcoming online discussion challenges. The LoF is deemed versatile for different student levels, though younger students may require more guidance. It empowers creative skills and problem-solving abilities across educational contexts. Flexibility in teaching methods allows students to be independent in discussions. LoF's applicability extends to subjects beyond

drama, enhancing group presentations and collaborative efforts. This adaptability aligns with social constructivism, promoting learner-centredness and collaborative learning across diverse educational levels and subjects, enriching the learning experience.

The study's discovery has important ramifications for how drama education will develop in the future. The study indicates that learning experiences in drama courses can be improved by explicitly implementing thinking routines to create a more dynamic and student-centred environment, whether online or physically. Incorporating structured thinking routines like LoF can benefit various subject areas by promoting clear articulation of ideas, constructive peer feedback and deeper engagement with content. Besides contributing to the pedagogy of drama education, the study could add to global discussions on VT applications. While primarily conducted in a Malaysian tertiary drama classroom, the results support the broader discourse on how VT routines can develop structured, meaningful and collaborative learning. Given that VT is already widely applied in Western education systems, this study adds valuable insight into its adaptability in non-Western educational contexts, particularly in disciplines that heavily rely on creativity and student interaction.

However, the study was not without limitations, as recognised in the methodology section earlier. Due to its limited scope of one drama classroom at a university utilising a single VT routine, this study may be used as a pilot for comparable research with a broader focus. The data collected from lecturers' perspectives can be used to supplement students' points of view in future studies. Comparing the perspectives of these two key players in education would be beneficial and could result in improved drama pedagogy. Additionally, in a larger context of tertiary drama classrooms, perceived insights about interactive roles and the impact of virtual drama classrooms using the VT routines can be compared to empirical evidence from classroom observations or other appropriate qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Professional development courses, workshops and seminars for teachers can raise awareness about Project Zero, its various thinking routines and their advantages, spread the word about VT and show how it can be used in a variety of educational settings.

## **Author contributions**

The authors confirmed their contribution to the paper as follows: the study conception and design: Author 1 and Author 2. Data collection, analysis and interpretation of results: Author 1. Methodology and Literature Review: All authors. All authors have reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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## Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials.

## Conflicts of interest

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## Scaffolding and Reading Comprehension: A Literature Review

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### Abstract

This literature review critically examined the role of scaffolding in enhancing reading comprehension among English as a Foreign Language and English as a Second Language learners. Grounded in Vygotskian theory, which posited that scaffolding provides temporary support enabling learners to perform tasks beyond their current capabilities, the review aimed to synthesise findings from 17 past studies. The guiding research questions included: What are the relevant past studies related to scaffolding and reading comprehension? What were the interventions used? What insights can be drawn from the results? Methodologically, this review involved a rigorous selection process, with studies chosen from the Scopus database based on their citation rankings and relevance. The findings revealed a diversity of scaffolding techniques, including technological scaffolding, collaborative learning, assessment-based interventions, and cognitive/metacognitive strategies. While most studies reported positive outcomes, such as improved reading comprehension and reduced learning anxiety, the effectiveness of these interventions was often influenced by contextual factors like learner characteristics and task complexity. The discussion emphasised the need for future research to optimise scaffolding techniques, particularly in technology-enhanced environments. This review contributed to the existing literature by offering educators and researchers a comprehensive reference for understanding the impact of scaffolding on reading comprehension. It underscored the importance of context-sensitive, adaptable scaffolding strategies to meet the evolving needs of learners in diverse educational settings. Future recommendations include exploring innovative scaffolding techniques and refining existing methods to enhance their efficacy across different learning environments.

**Keywords:** *scaffolding, reading comprehension, EFL education, ESL education*

### Introduction

Scaffolding refers to the temporary support provided by an expert to a learner, enabling the completion of tasks that would otherwise exceed the learner's current capabilities (Gunawardena & Wilson, 2021). This pedagogical approach has gained considerable prominence in educational settings due to its capacity to enhance student learning and engagement. Reading comprehension, a complex cognitive process requiring multiple linguistic and cognitive skills, is fundamental to both academic success and lifelong learning. Scaffolding strategies function as an instructional bridge, facilitating students' progression from their existing abilities to more advanced levels of text comprehension.

Extensive research has documented the effectiveness of scaffolding in reading comprehension across diverse educational contexts. By enabling the gradual transfer of responsibility from teacher to student, scaffolding fosters learner autonomy and enhances reading proficiency. Previous studies have identified various

scaffolding approaches—cognitive, metacognitive, and motivational—as effective interventions for improving reading comprehension, particularly in relation to challenging or unfamiliar content (Clark & Graves, 2005). However, despite the well-established benefits of scaffolding, significant gaps persist in the literature regarding its optimal implementation and the comparative effectiveness of different scaffolding strategies.

A key limitation of existing research is the insufficient attention given to the integration of motivational scaffolding alongside cognitive and metacognitive support. While cognitive and metacognitive scaffolding have been extensively examined, the role of motivational scaffolding in sustaining student engagement and perseverance in reading tasks remains underexplored (Beek et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is no clear consensus on how scaffolding techniques should be adapted based on student characteristics, including age, proficiency level, and learning environment. Addressing these gaps is crucial for refining instructional practices and maximising the benefits of scaffolding in reading comprehension.

This literature review contributes to the field by synthesising existing research on the implementation and outcomes of scaffolding strategies, with particular emphasis on underexamined areas such as motivational scaffolding. In doing so, it seeks to provide educators with a nuanced understanding of how different forms of scaffolding interact to support reading comprehension. Moreover, this review aims to identify the underlying mechanisms that contribute to scaffolding's effectiveness, thereby offering evidence-based recommendations for optimising its application in diverse educational settings. Given the dynamic nature of reading comprehension, a more responsive and tailored approach to scaffolding is essential to ensure that instructional support aligns with students' evolving needs (Reynolds & Daniel, 2018). By addressing these gaps, this study advances the discourse on scaffolding and offers practical insights for educators seeking to improve students' reading comprehension outcomes. The research questions are:

1. What are the relevant past studies related to scaffolding and reading comprehension?
2. What were the interventions used?
3. What insights can be drawn from the results?

## **Literature Review**

Researchers have been looking This section explores the concepts of scaffolding and reading comprehension. The term "scaffolding" was originally introduced by Bruner (Wood et al., 1976) to describe the various forms of support that allow learners to perform at more advanced levels within their zones of proximal development. Currently, the concept of "scaffolding" is utilised to explain the process by which a knowledgeable individual assists the learner in transitioning from guided assistance to independent performance (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

The instructional technique referred to as "scaffolding" is not intended to simplify the task at hand. Instead, it empowers learners to successfully complete the activity with the support of a teacher or instructor. Initially, it is essential to provide the student with the highest level of assistance to maximise their performance potential. Over time, the level of support is gradually reduced as the learner develops the capability to perform tasks with increasing independence. At this point, the instructor transitions the responsibility for task execution to the learner, thereby removing the scaffolding. The learner then becomes capable of operating autonomously at a level of proficiency comparable to their earlier performance when supported by scaffolding. Vygotsky (1987) argues that tasks a child can accomplish collaboratively in the present will eventually be achievable independently in the future.

For scaffolding to produce positive outcomes, educators must focus on helping students develop problem-solving strategies that can be applied to unfamiliar situations, rather than merely providing answers to specific questions. For instance, when a child encounters an unfamiliar word, instead of directly supplying the meaning, the educator can use a scaffolding approach to nurture problem-solving skills. This can be accomplished by encouraging the child to employ strategies within their cognitive capabilities, such as using visual aids or contextual clues. Gradually, the child will reach a stage where they no longer require the teacher's assistance and can independently initiate the necessary strategy without any prompting.

The term "scaffolding" is a relatively recent concept that emerged within Western academic discourse. It is important to note that Vygotskian scholars did not use this specific terminology in their own works. However, the concept of scaffolding closely aligns with a theoretical framework developed by Pyotr Galperin, Daniel Elkonin, and their colleagues. Galperin's (1969, 1985) framework revolves around the notion of "step-by-step formation," emphasising the gradual transfer of responsibility from a more experienced individual to a less experienced one. This transfer is facilitated through two key strategies: materialisation and private speech. Thus, the processes of materialisation and private speech function as the scaffolding necessary for learning, as described in Western psychological discourse.

The interpretation and application of the scaffolding metaphor in educational research demonstrate considerable diversity and are sometimes employed in a broad sense to denote various concepts (Hammond, 2002, p.2). Scaffolding has been broadly defined as "a means of providing assistance for the growth and education of children and adolescents" (Rasmussen, 2001, p.570). The term can be used as an overarching metaphor to describe how educators or peers provide students with the necessary resources to acquire knowledge (Jacobs, 2001, p.125). The integration of a systematic theoretical framework, alongside multiple educational theories (Jacobs, 2001; Rasmussen, 2001), enriches the context in which the scaffolding metaphor is implemented, making it more generalised. Hammond et al. (2002) argue that there is a pressing need for a more in-depth exploration of scaffolding within the context of language and literacy education, highlighting the crucial role of language in the scaffolding process.

The cognitive process of reading comprehension represents a highly intricate and multifaceted behaviour in which individuals engage. Scholars in the field of reading have undertaken rigorous examinations to determine the most effective approaches for thoroughly and meaningfully depicting the complex nature of reading comprehension. Over the past few decades, numerous theoretical frameworks have been proposed by esteemed researchers such as Perfetti and Stafura (2014). The current array of models encompasses a range of theoretical frameworks that elucidate the intricate connections and interplay among various sub-components of comprehension. Furthermore, these models delve into the complexities of specific comprehension processes.

One theoretical framework, commonly known as the Simple View of Reading (SVR), posits that the cognitive process of reading comprehension is attributable to the combined influence of two fundamental components: word decoding and linguistic comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Numerous linguistic studies have demonstrated that reading comprehension can be explained through the lens of individual differences in these two core constituents. However, it is important to recognise that the interaction between these components undergoes temporal variations, as highlighted by Catts (2018).

In the early stages of development, the process of decoding demonstrates a stronger correlation with reading comprehension than linguistic competence. However, once decoding proficiency is attained, linguistic comprehension becomes a more reliable predictor of reading comprehension (Catts et al., 2005). The Simple View of Reading (SVR) has proven to be a valuable tool for both researchers and practitioners, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding the diverse profiles of individuals who experience reading difficulties. These profiles include students who face challenges primarily due to word-level obstacles, commonly referred to as dyslexic readers.

Additionally, the Simple View of Reading (SVR) helps in understanding individuals who struggle with comprehension issues, known as poor comprehenders. It also provides insight into those who experience a combination of both word-level difficulties and comprehension challenges, often referred to as garden variety poor readers. While this model has proven to be highly useful, it unfortunately does not account for the intricate subcomponents of language or the cognitive processes that underlie reading comprehension (Catts, 2018).

## **Methodology**

To conduct a comprehensive literature review, the researcher initially selected the keywords "scaffolding" and "reading comprehension." A preliminary search on Google Scholar yielded 17,100 results published since 2020, which was deemed unmanageable. Consequently, the researcher turned to the Scopus database, employing the same keywords. This search identified a total of 45 relevant studies. After a thorough screen-

ing and filtering process, 26 studies were deemed suitable for inclusion in the review. Ultimately, 17 of these studies were successfully downloaded for further analysis, owing to their open-access availability. A flowchart is displayed below for better understanding.

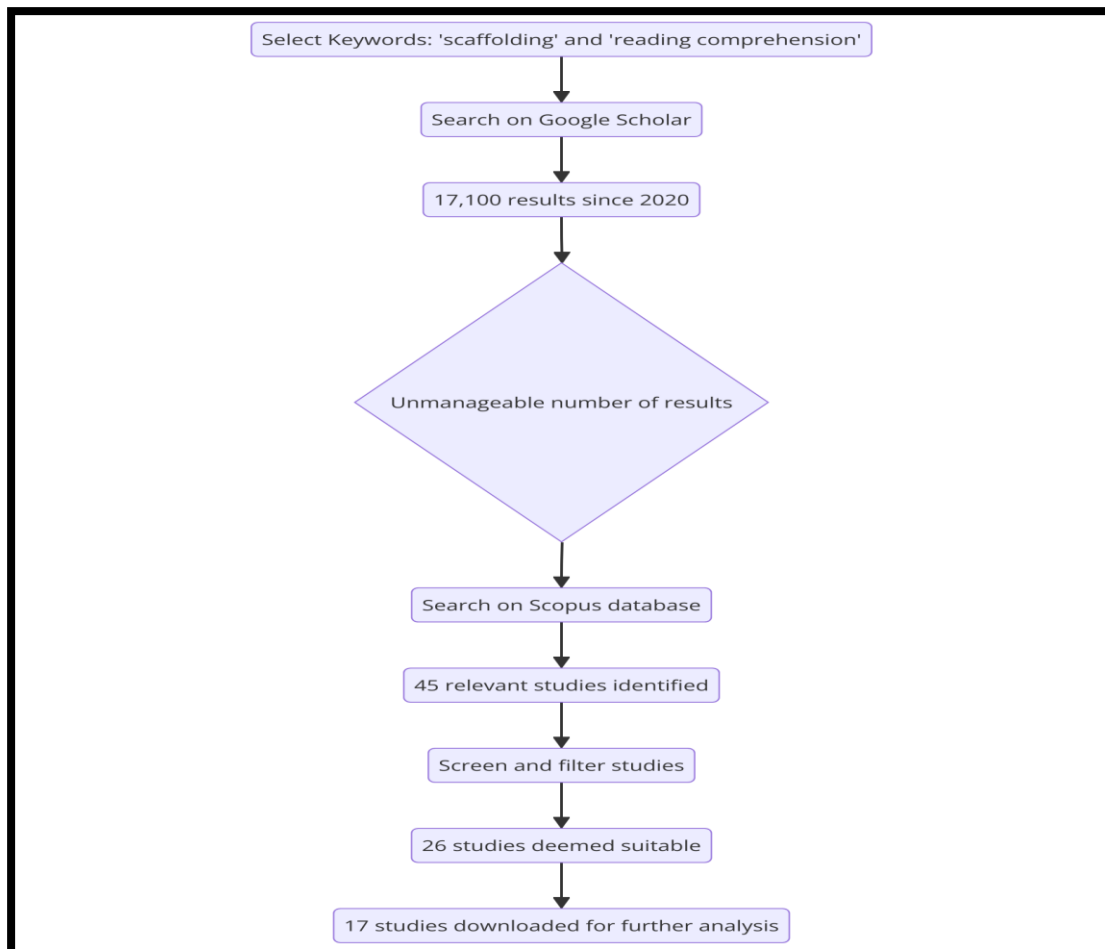


Figure 1: Flowchart of Research Methodology

## Findings

The findings related to each research question were reported systematically.

### What are the relevant past studies related to scaffolding and reading comprehension?

To address this research question, a table is provided below. It includes a total of 17 past studies relevant to scaffolding and reading comprehension, all of which were downloaded with open access from Scopus. These studies were selected based on their top citation rankings, highlighting their significance and relevance in the fields of scaffolding and reading comprehension.

Table 1: Relevant Past Studies

No.	Author(s)	Year	Title	Journal	Citation
1	Jamali Kivi et al.	2021	The Comparative Effects of Teacher Versus Peer-Scaffolding on EFL Learners' Incidental Vocabulary Learning and Reading Comprehension: A Socio-Cultural Perspective	Journal of Psycholinguistic Research	19
2	Rafi & Morgan	2024	Translanguaging as a Transformative Act in a Reading Classroom: Perspectives from a Bangladeshi Private University	Journal of Language, Identity and Education	16
3	Wang et al.	2021	Technological solutions for sustainable development: Effects of a visual prompt scaffolding-based virtual reality approach on EFL learners' reading comprehension, learning attitude, motivation, and anxiety	Sustainability	14
4	Kazemi et al.	2020	Dynamic assessment in English classrooms: Fostering learners' reading comprehension and motivation	Cogent Psychology	14
5	Kuhn	2020	Whole class or small group fluency instruction: A tutorial of four effective approaches	Education Sciences	9
6	Ahmed Abdel Ibrahim et al.	2023	Collaborative learning, scaffolding-based instruction, and self-assessment: impacts on intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension, motivation, and anxiety	Language Testing in Asia	5
7	Maharsi et al.	2021	Evaluating Flipped Classroom Approach In EFL Students' Reading Classes	LLT Journal: Journal on Language and Language Teaching	5

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8	Diprossimo et al.	2023	The associations between child and item characteristics, use of vocabulary scaffolds, and reading comprehension in a digital environment: Insights from a big data approach	Contemporary Educational Psychology	4
9	Liu et al.	2023	Effects of an article-structure strategy-based spherical video-based virtual reality approach on EFL learners' English reading comprehension and learning conceptions	Interactive Learning Environments	4
10	Zarei & Alipour	2020	Shadowing and scaffolding techniques affecting L2 reading comprehension	Applied Research on English Language	4
11	Song & Glazewski	2023	Scaffolding self-regulated learning in student-generated questioning using mobile phones	Education and Information Technologies	3
12	Cholsakorn & Piamsai	2022	The effects of differentiated reading instruction on reading comprehension and self-efficacy of Thai undergraduate students	Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences	3
13	Berenji	2021	Enhancing Metacognitive Scaffolding and Comprehension Ability through Problem-Based Learning in an EFL Context	Education Research International	3
14	Michalsky	2021	When to Scaffold Motivational Self-Regulation Strategies for High School Students' Science Text Comprehension	Frontiers in Psychology	2
15	Ozaki & Ueda	2020	The effects of digital scaffolding on adolescent English reading in Japan: An experimental study on visual-syntactic text formatting	JALT CALL Journal	2
16	Noor	2021	Integrating reading and writing in testing reading comprehension of the Afghan EFL language learners	Cogent Education	1

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17	Arora et al.	2024	Scaffolding instruction for improvement in learning English language skills	International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education	0
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The provided table summarises various research articles that examine the impact of different scaffolding techniques on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' reading comprehension, motivation, and related aspects. The following is a synthesised account of the findings based on the titles, journals, and citations of these articles. Several studies have investigated the comparative effectiveness of different scaffolding strategies. First of all, Jamali Kivi et al. (2021) examined the relative impact of teacher versus peer scaffolding on EFL learners' incidental vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension, adopting a socio-cultural lens. This study has garnered 19 citations, reflecting its significance in the field. Next, Rafi and Morgan (2024) explored the transformative potential of translanguaging in a reading classroom at a Bangladeshi private university. Their research has received 16 citations, indicating considerable scholarly interest. Following that, Wang et al. (2021) focused on the effects of visual prompt scaffolding within a virtual reality environment on EFL learners' reading comprehension, learning attitude, motivation, and anxiety. This study has been cited 14 times, demonstrating the growing attention to technological scaffolding in EFL contexts. Next, Kazemi et al. (2020) explored dynamic assessment as a tool to enhance reading comprehension and motivation in EFL settings. Their work has similarly been cited 14 times, underscoring the relevance of dynamic assessment in language education. In another study, Kuhn (2020) provided a comprehensive tutorial on effective approaches to fluency instruction in both whole-class and small group contexts. This article has received 9 citations, suggesting its utility as a resource for educators.

Additionally, Ahmed Abdel Al-Ibrahim et al. (2023) investigated the effects of collaborative learning, scaffolding-based instruction, and self-assessment on EFL learners' reading comprehension, motivation, and anxiety. This study has been cited 5 times, indicating its emerging influence. To continue, Maharsi et al. (2021) evaluated the flipped classroom approach in EFL reading classes with 5 citations, highlighting the continued exploration of innovative instructional methods. On the other hand, Diprossimo et al. (2023) utilised big data approaches to examine the interplay between child and item characteristics, vocabulary scaffold use, and reading comprehension within a digital environment. Their research has received 4 citations. Moreover, Liu et al. (2023) studied the impact of a strategy-based spherical video virtual reality approach on EFL learners' reading comprehension and learning conceptions. This study has also been cited 4 times, reflecting interest in virtual reality as an educational tool. Furthermore, Zarei and Alipour (2020) explored the effects of shadowing and scaffolding techniques on L2 reading comprehension. Their work has garnered 4

citations. Similarly, Song and Glazewski (2023) investigated scaffolding self-regulated learning through student-generated questioning using mobile phones. This study has been cited 3 times, indicating an interest in mobile technology as a scaffolding tool.

Subsequently, Cholsakorn and Piamsai (2022) examined the effects of differentiated reading instruction on the reading comprehension and self-efficacy of Thai undergraduate students. Their research has been cited 3 times. Berenji (2021) discussed the enhancement of metacognitive scaffolding and comprehension ability through problem-based learning in an EFL context. This paper has received 3 citations. In the same year, Michalsky (2021) explored the timing of scaffolding motivational self-regulation strategies to improve high school students' comprehension of science texts. This study has been cited 2 times.

To add on, Ozaki and Ueda (2020) analysed the effects of digital scaffolding on adolescent English reading in Japan. This study has received 2 citations. Also, Noor (2021) investigated the integration of reading and writing in assessing the reading comprehension of Afghan EFL learners. This study has been cited once. Finally, Arora et al. (2024) discussed scaffolding instruction to improve English language skills. This study has yet to be cited. These studies underscored the broad array of strategies being explored and implemented to improve the educational outcomes of EFL learners across various contexts.

### **What were the interventions used?**

The 17 past studies present a diverse range of scaffolding interventions aimed at enhancing reading comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. These interventions can be categorised into several broader themes based on their underlying principles and approaches: Pedagogical Approaches, Technological Scaffolding, Collaborative Learning Strategies, Assessment-Based Interventions, and Cognitive and Metacognitive Scaffolding Techniques.

#### ***Pedagogical Approaches***

Translanguaging Pedagogy, as explored by Rafi and Morgan (2024), utilised translanguaging as a transformative classroom practice. This approach allowed students to draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire, thereby enhancing reading comprehension by treating language as a dynamic and fluid process. Similarly, Kuhn (2020) examined fluency-oriented instructional methods, such as wide fluency-oriented reading instruction and oral reading approaches, which focussed on repeated reading and fluency practice to bolster comprehension. Chosakorn and Piamsai (2022) delved into differentiated reading instruction tailored to individual learners' needs, thereby fostering reading comprehension and self-efficacy through personalised teaching strategies. Additionally, Arora et al. (2024) investigated various scaffolding techniques, including chunking, modelling, bridging, and contextualising, offering a nuanced approach that can be adjusted according to learner needs and content complexity.

### ***Technological Scaffolding***

In technological scaffolding, Wang et al. (2021) introduced a virtual reality (VR) intervention that employed visual prompts to scaffold learning, which can enhance motivation and reduce anxiety while improving reading comprehension. Liu et al. (2023) further explored technological innovation through a spherical video-based VR approach that integrated an article-structured strategy to scaffold reading comprehension. Di-prossimo et al. (2023) leveraged a gamified digital reading platform embedded with vocabulary scaffolds to support comprehension in a digitally immersive environment, capitalising on the motivational aspects of gamification. Moreover, Ozaki and Ueda (2020) implemented a digital scaffolding method that restructures text visually and syntactically, particularly aiding adolescents in reading comprehension.

### ***Collaborative Learning Strategies***

Collaborative learning strategies are also prominent in these interventions. Ahmed Abdel-Al Ibrahim et al. (2023) combined collaborative learning with scaffolding and self-assessment, thereby promoting deeper engagement and autonomy in reading comprehension tasks. Zarei and Alipour (2020) explored various forms of peer-based scaffolding, such as distributed and reciprocal scaffolding, where students support each other's learning in cooperative environments.

### ***Assessment-Based Interventions***

Assessment-based interventions also play a critical role. Kazemi et al. (2020) focussed on dynamic assessment as an intervention model that adapts to learners' immediate needs, providing real-time scaffolding to enhance comprehension and motivation. The flipped classroom approach, evaluated by Maharsi et al. (2021), involved learners being introduced to new content at home, followed by more interactive and scaffolded classroom activities, which promote a deeper understanding of reading materials. Michalsky (2021) presented a metamotivational self-regulated learning model that scaffolds students' motivational strategies, directly impacting their reading comprehension and engagement with scientific texts.

### ***Cognitive and Metacognitive Scaffolding Techniques***

Finally, cognitive and metacognitive scaffolding techniques are explored through various approaches. Berenji (2021) introduced problem-based learning (PBL) as a scaffolding technique, where students tackle complex, real-world problems, thereby enhancing their metacognitive abilities and comprehension skills in an EFL context. Song and Glazewski (2023) focussed on scaffolding student-generated questioning, which promotes self-regulated learning and critical thinking, directly influencing reading comprehension. Additionally, Noor (2021) investigated synthesis writing as a scaffolding technique that integrates reading and writing tasks, reinforcing comprehension through the synthesis of information across texts.

Overall, the diversity of scaffolding interventions aimed at improving reading comprehension among EFL learners reflects the complexity of language acquisition and the necessity for tailored approaches. The categorisation of these interventions underscored the variety of pedagogical, technological, collaborative, assessment-based, and cognitive strategies employed across different contexts. Each approach offered unique advantages, contingent upon the learners' needs, the learning environment, and the instructional goals. The effectiveness of these scaffolding strategies highlights the importance of providing structured support that adapts to learners' evolving competencies and challenges. A figure is shown below illustrating all of the 17 interventions employed.

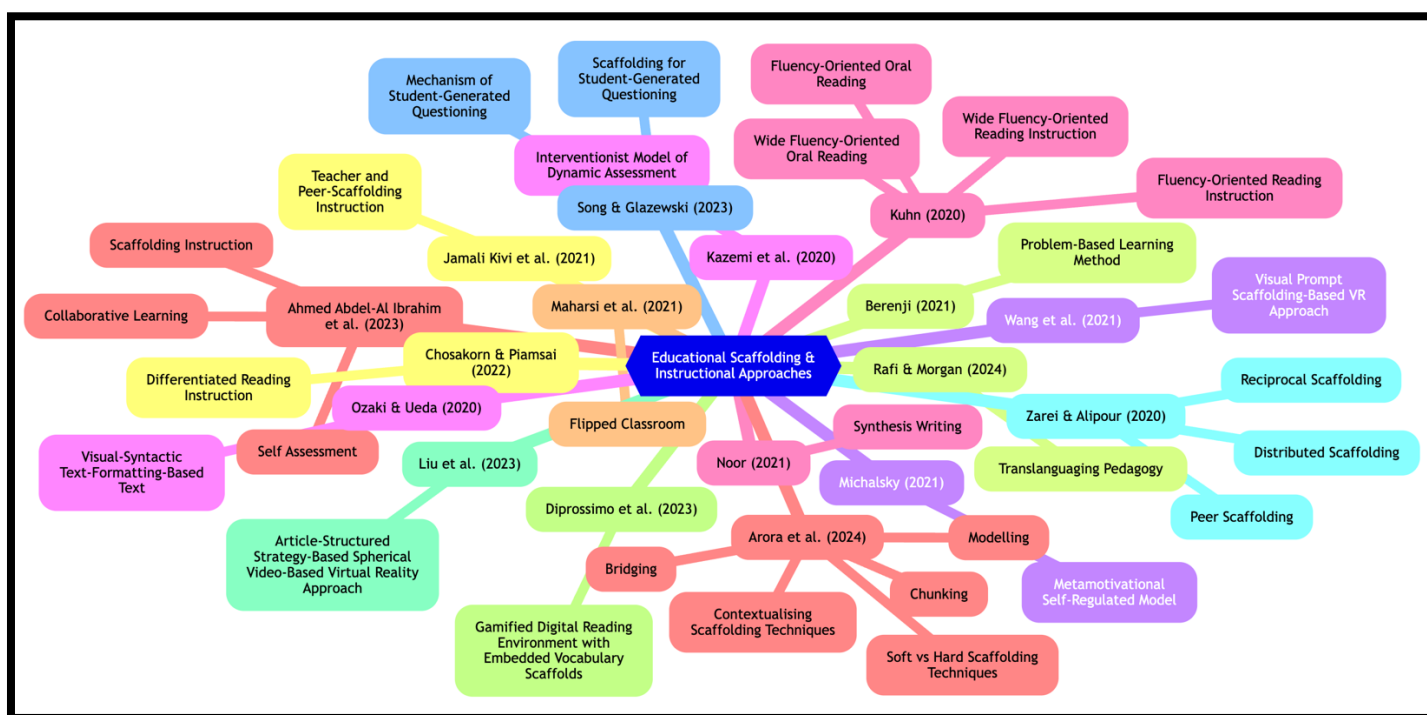


Figure 2: Interventions Used

### What insights can be drawn from the results?

To draw insights from previous studies, the results of each study were first reported. To initiate, Jamili Kivi et al. (2021) examined the application of various forms of scaffolding (i.e., teacher versus peer scaffolding) on EFL learners' incidental vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension performance from a socio-cultural perspective. The findings revealed that both experimental groups outperformed the control group, with a significant difference between teacher scaffolding and peer scaffolding in both vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension performance. Notably, the peer-scaffolding group demonstrated superior performance compared to the teacher-scaffolding group. Next, Rafi and Morgan (2024) explored the role of translanguaging pedagogy in the reading comprehension of first-year students in an English-medium classroom at a Bangladeshi private university. Their results indicated that the translanguaging space provided op-

portunities at each stage of the intervention to maximise the use of students' linguistic and semiotic resources, facilitating their comfort and enhancing epistemic access to and comprehension of complex English texts. The intentional design of the lecture, incorporating scaffolding with multilingual words and expressions, as well as guided reading with Bangla text and topics relevant to students' lives, deeply engaged them with the content while also transforming their knowledge and perceptions of the subject matter.

Similarly, Wang et al. (2021) proposed a visual prompt scaffolding-based virtual reality (VPS-VR) approach to create a more immersive EFL learning environment and to enhance students' reading comprehension skills. To assess the effectiveness of this approach, an experiment was conducted in an English reading course at a Chinese university. The findings indicated that the VPS-VR approach had a positive impact on students' EFL reading comprehension, learning motivation, and English learning anxiety. Additionally, it was observed that the experimental group showed significant improvement in lower-level reading comprehension skills, such as information location and text comprehension, while higher-level skills, including reflection and evaluation, were less affected. Additionally, Kazemi et al. (2020) examined whether implementing an interventionist model of dynamic assessment (DA), characterised by a repetitive process of pretest-teach-retest, could enhance reading comprehension and positively influence learners' reading motivation in the EFL context of Iran. Descriptive and inferential analyses of the data collected over four months revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in reading comprehension skills, suggesting that the use of DA provides effective scaffolding to support students' understanding of reading texts. A noticeable improvement in the reading motivation levels of the experimental group was also observed.

Moreover, Kuhn (2020) reviewed four scientifically validated approaches to fluency instruction: Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction, Wide Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction, Fluency-Oriented Oral Reading, and Wide Fluency-Oriented Oral Reading. All four approaches employed challenging texts, positioned at the upper end of learners' zones of proximal development, thereby granting learners access to a broader vocabulary and a wider array of concepts than would be possible with texts at the instructional level. Moreover, these approaches offered highly effective procedures for both whole-class and small-group reading instruction. Subsequently, Ahmed Abdel-Al Ibrahim et al. (2023) investigated the effects of collaborative learning (CL), scaffolding instruction, and self-assessment on the reading anxiety, reading motivation, and reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. The data analysis revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in all three areas: reading anxiety, reading motivation, and reading comprehension. The study concluded that the implementation of CL, self-assessment, and scaffolding instruction enabled Iranian EFL learners to enhance their reading comprehension and motivation while simultaneously reducing their reading anxiety.

In addition, Maharsi et al. (2021) examined the implementation of the flipped classroom approach in an EFL private university in Indonesia, focusing on its impact on students' reading comprehension and their perceptions of the flipped classroom in their learning process. The results indicated that students in traditional classrooms experienced a greater increase in their post-test scores compared to their counterparts in flipped classrooms. This difference may be attributed to the teacher-led instruction and scaffolding commonly provided in traditional settings, where students benefit from direct explanations and the ability to ask questions immediately. Additional factors contributing to this outcome include students' hesitation or discomfort with using technology in learning, challenges in task-related time management, and the increased workload associated with technology use. Nonetheless, many students perceived the flipped classroom as fostering independent, responsible, active, and flexible learning. Later, Diprossimo et al. (2023) explored the increasingly common use of scaffolding features that provide multimodal support for pronunciation and meaning in digital reading environments. These vocabulary scaffolds were designed to enhance the accurate pronunciation and comprehension of words within context, thereby supporting both vocabulary development and overall text comprehension. However, evidence regarding their effectiveness remains inconclusive. This study contributed to the existing literature by examining: 1) whether child characteristics predict the use of vocabulary scaffolds; 2) whether the use of vocabulary scaffolds is associated with improved reading comprehension; and 3) whether the relationship between scaffold use and reading comprehension is influenced by child and/or item characteristics. Confirmatory analyses using Generalized Linear Mixed Models (GLMMs) revealed that children with lower literacy skills, beginning readers, girls, and bilingual students were more likely to use scaffolds. Overall, scaffold use was associated with better reading comprehension performance, and this association was modulated by both child and item characteristics.

Subsequently, Liu et al. (2023) highlighted the critical yet challenging nature of reading comprehension in the English learning process. EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners frequently struggle to grasp the meaning of texts due to a lack of authentic learning contexts, often leading to a superficial, literal understanding of the material. To address this issue, the study proposed an Article-Structure Strategy-based Spherical Video-based Virtual Reality (ASS-SVVR) approach, where SVVR was utilised to immerse EFL learners in a realistic environment, while the article-structure strategy provided step-by-step reading scaffolding to enhance reading efficiency, accuracy, and comprehension. The research findings indicated that EFL students employing the ASS-SVVR approach demonstrated positive outcomes in reading comprehension, extrinsic learning motivation, and metacognitive awareness of reading strategies. Additionally, there were no significant differences between the groups concerning cognitive load and sense of presence. On the other hand, Zarei and Alipour (2020) investigated the effects of three scaffolding techniques (peer scaffolding, distributed scaffolding, and reciprocal scaffolding) compared to three types of shadowing (complete shadowing, partial shadowing, and interactive shadowing) on L2 reading comprehension. The results re-

vealed that among the scaffolding techniques, distributed scaffolding was the most effective in enhancing reading comprehension. In the shadowing groups, interactive shadowing emerged as the most effective technique. Furthermore, a significant difference was observed between the shadowing and scaffolding techniques, with the scaffolding techniques proving to be more effective overall.

To continue, Song and Glazewski (2023) explored the sustainability and affordability of using information technology in the context of reading comprehension tasks, specifically focusing on the mechanism of student-generated questioning (SGQ) and the scaffolding for SGQ within a self-regulated learning framework. The analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data indicated that SGQ enhances reading comprehension by promoting engaged reading, supported by metacognitive guidance. Next, Cholsakorn and Piamsai (2022) examined the effects of differentiated reading instruction (DRI) on the reading comprehension and self-efficacy of undergraduate students. The findings revealed significant improvements in both reading comprehension and self-efficacy, with the most substantial gains observed in students with lower proficiency levels. Similarly, Berenji (2021) aimed to implement a problem-based learning (PBL) method in an EFL instructional setting to assess its impact on learners' awareness and use of metacognitive reading strategies, as well as their comprehension abilities. The results, based on univariate analysis of covariance, indicated that the experimental group showed a high level of awareness of metacognitive reading strategies and significantly enhanced their comprehension abilities. Moreover, Michalsky (2021) investigated the optimal timing for the implementation of metamotivational scaffolding in the self-regulation of scientific text comprehension. The findings suggested that delivering metamotivational scaffolding could be a critical strategy for promoting students' science literacy and persistence with challenging scientific tasks. This was particularly effective at the reflection-before-action stage, where students anticipate future actions, and at the reflection-on-action stage, where they review past actions.

Following that, Ozaki and Ueda (2020) investigated the effects of Visual-Syntactic Text Formatting (VSTF)-based text on reading speed, comprehension, efficiency, and retention among middle and high school students. The study found that while middle school students did not exhibit significant differences between block-formatted text and VSTF-based text, low-proficiency high school students demonstrated significant improvements in reading speed, comprehension, efficiency, and retention when using VSTF-based text. High-proficiency high school students showed significant increases in reading speed and retention. Subjective feedback from students across all grades indicated a general preference for VSTF-based text, with many believing it to be more effective than block-formatted text. Also, Noor (2021) conducted a study to evaluate a potential new method for assessing reading comprehension at the college level in Afghanistan. The study assessed whether synthesis writing, as a form of reading-writing integration, could effectively measure the reading comprehension of Afghan sophomore students. Additionally, a gap-filling activity was used to determine if a cognitively less challenging task could provide scaffolding support for completing a

more complex task. The results indicated that the order of task presentation influenced participants' performance. Contrary to expectations, presenting the reading-to-write-a-synthesis activity before the gap-filling activity led to better performance on the more challenging synthesis task. Finally, Arora et al. (2024) explored the effectiveness of scaffolding instruction for university-level EFL/ESL students in enhancing their language learning skills, specifically critical reading and study skills. Both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that scaffolding instruction significantly improved the participants' language learning abilities. The findings highlighted the importance of conducting scaffolding instruction in small groups, assigning pre-planned and well-structured tasks with clear instructions, and providing scaffolding on an as-needed basis, particularly in mixed-ability groups of EFL/ESL students. This approach was emphasised as crucial for promoting sustainable education.

A comprehensive and critical analysis of seventeen studies on scaffolding in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts underscored the varied effectiveness of different scaffolding strategies in enhancing language learning outcomes. These studies, which explored a range of instructional methods, consistently emphasised the importance of scaffolding in improving reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall learner motivation. However, the effectiveness of these techniques was influenced by contextual factors such as learners' proficiency levels, the educational environment, and the integration of technology. In terms of comparing peer and teacher scaffolding, Jamili Kivi et al. (2021) found that both approaches were effective, with peer scaffolding proving more beneficial in enhancing EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. This suggested that peer interactions may offer a more supportive and relatable environment for language learning, possibly due to the collaborative nature of peer scaffolding, which fosters shared understanding and mutual support. Further emphasising the role of language in scaffolding, Rafi and Morgan (2024) explored translanguaging pedagogy in a Bangladeshi university. Their findings revealed that leveraging students' linguistic resources in the classroom significantly enhanced reading comprehension. This approach allowed students to engage more deeply with complex texts by using their native languages alongside English, highlighting the value of a multilingual approach, particularly in contexts where full immersion in English may be challenging.

The integration of technology in scaffolding emerged as a significant theme in several studies. Wang et al. (2021) introduced a visual prompt scaffolding-based virtual reality (VPS-VR) approach, which improved reading comprehension and reduced English learning anxiety. However, the benefits were more pronounced for lower-level comprehension skills, suggesting that while technology can enhance basic comprehension, it may require supplementary strategies to support higher-order cognitive skills. In contrast, Maharsi et al. (2021) found that traditional teacher-led instruction resulted in higher post-test scores compared to flipped classrooms, where students had more autonomy. The challenges associated with technology use, such as time management and increased workload, might have contributed to the lower effectiveness of

the flipped classroom approach, highlighting the need for careful integration of technology in learning environments.

Dynamic assessment and collaborative learning were also highlighted as effective scaffolding strategies. Kazemi et al. (2020) demonstrated that dynamic assessment, characterised by a repetitive cycle of pre-testing, teaching, and retesting, significantly improved both reading comprehension and motivation among Iranian EFL learners. This approach emphasises the value of ongoing formative assessment as a scaffolding tool, particularly in contexts where continuous support is required. Extending this discussion, Ahmed Abdel-Al Ibrahim et al. (2023) incorporated collaborative learning and self-assessment into scaffolding strategies, finding these methods particularly effective in reducing reading anxiety and improving motivation and comprehension in mixed-ability groups.

The studies also explored multimodal and structured scaffolding techniques. Diprossimo et al. (2023) examined the use of multimodal scaffolding in digital reading environments, focusing on pronunciation and vocabulary development. While scaffolding was associated with improved reading comprehension, its effectiveness varied depending on learner characteristics such as literacy skills and language background, indicating the need for tailoring scaffolding to individual learner needs. Zarei and Alipour (2020) compared various scaffolding techniques, including peer, distributed, and reciprocal scaffolding, with shadowing techniques, finding distributed scaffolding to be the most effective for reading comprehension.

In terms of reading fluency and comprehension, Kuhn (2020) reviewed fluency-oriented reading instruction approaches that employed challenging texts positioned at the upper end of learners' zones of proximal development. These approaches were effective in expanding learners' vocabulary and conceptual understanding, reinforcing the importance of selecting appropriately challenging materials in scaffolding interventions. Similarly, Liu et al. (2023) employed a spherical video-based virtual reality (SVVR) approach combined with an article-structure strategy, which not only improved reading comprehension but also enhanced metacognitive awareness of reading strategies, demonstrating the potential of immersive environments to support complex cognitive skills.

Problem-based and differentiated learning were also explored as scaffolding strategies. Berenji (2021) examined the impact of problem-based learning (PBL) on metacognitive strategy awareness and reading comprehension, finding significant improvements in learners' comprehension abilities, particularly in applying metacognitive strategies during reading tasks. This suggests that PBL can effectively foster higher-order thinking skills. Cholsakorn and Piamsai (2022) investigated differentiated reading instruction (DRI), noting significant improvements in reading comprehension and self-efficacy, particularly among lower-proficiency students, indicating that DRI, when combined with scaffolding, can effectively support diverse learners.

Innovations in scaffolding techniques were highlighted by Michalsky (2021), who focused on the timing of metamotivational scaffolding in the self-regulation of scientific text comprehension. The study concluded that providing scaffolding at critical points, such as before or after reading tasks, significantly improved students' persistence and comprehension, particularly in challenging scientific texts. Ozaki and Ueda (2020) investigated the effects of Visual-Syntactic Text Formatting (VSTF) on reading comprehension and retention, finding it particularly beneficial for low-proficiency high school students, enhancing both comprehension and retention. Finally, Noor (2021) evaluated a new method for assessing reading comprehension through synthesis writing and gap-filling activities, revealing that task sequencing plays a crucial role in scaffolding, with the order of tasks significantly impacting performance on more complex tasks.

In conclusion, the collective findings of these studies underscored the critical role of scaffolding in EFL/ESL education. While peer interactions, dynamic assessments, and technology-enhanced environments all contribute positively to language learning, the effectiveness of scaffolding depends heavily on contextual factors such as learner characteristics, task complexity, and the integration of technology. To maximise the benefits of scaffolding, educators must carefully consider these variables and tailor their instructional approaches accordingly.

## **Discussion**

A review of seventeen studies on scaffolding in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts provides valuable insights into its effectiveness and challenges. The findings indicate that scaffolding improves reading comprehension, vocabulary learning, and student engagement. Peer scaffolding appears to be more effective than teacher-led scaffolding, as it encourages collaboration and deeper understanding (Jamali Kivi et al., 2021). Translanguaging pedagogy supports multilingual learners by allowing them to use their full linguistic repertoire, making it easier to understand texts in diverse classrooms (Rafi & Morgan, 2024). Additionally, technology-based scaffolding, such as visual prompts in virtual reality environments, enhances engagement and reduces anxiety among learners (Wang et al., 2021). However, the effectiveness of scaffolding depends on the learning context, requiring strategies to be tailored to different student needs. These results align with earlier research showing that scaffolding enhances language learning and reading skills. However, this review highlights the growing importance of integrating technology and multilingual approaches into scaffolding practices. The effectiveness of translanguaging aligns with the broader movement towards inclusive and culturally responsive teaching, while studies on digital scaffolding reflect a shift towards interactive and immersive learning environments. A key strength of these studies is their diverse research methods, including experimental, longitudinal, and case study approaches, which provide a well-rounded understanding of scaffolding across different settings. However, some limitations exist, such as variations in study design, differences in participant backgrounds, and incon-

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sistent ways of measuring scaffolding outcomes. Studies on technology-based scaffolding also highlight challenges such as cognitive overload, accessibility issues, and differences in students' familiarity with digital tools, which could affect the effectiveness of these methods in different classrooms. These findings have important implications for teaching, policy, and future research. Educators should consider using peer scaffolding and translanguaging strategies to create more inclusive and collaborative learning environments. Policymakers should support the use of technology-based scaffolding while ensuring that such tools are accessible and fairly implemented. Future research should focus on refining the sequencing of scaffolding techniques, improving technological interventions, and investigating the long-term impact of scaffolding on language learning. Addressing these areas will deepen our understanding of scaffolding and its role in improving reading comprehension in EFL and ESL education.

## **Conclusion**

A consistent finding across the reviewed studies is the emphasis on the effectiveness of scaffolding in enhancing reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall learner motivation. Peer interactions and translanguaging pedagogy have been identified as key strategies that foster supportive and engaging learning environments. These approaches facilitate comprehension while promoting a collaborative and inclusive classroom dynamic, particularly in multilingual settings.

Moreover, technology has emerged as a significant tool in scaffolding, with interventions such as virtual reality and digital scaffolds showing potential for enhancing reading comprehension and reducing learning anxiety. However, the effectiveness of these technological interventions depends on learners' familiarity with digital tools and the complexity of the tasks involved. This highlights the need for further research on optimising technological scaffolding to ensure accessibility and effectiveness for a broad range of learners.

Despite the positive outcomes, challenges remain in the implementation of scaffolding strategies. Factors such as students' comfort with technology, the complexity of scaffolding tasks, and individual learner characteristics influence the success of these interventions. Future research should focus on tailoring scaffolding techniques to better meet the diverse needs of learners, particularly in technology-enhanced learning environments.

This literature review provides educators and researchers with a critical reference for understanding the current landscape of scaffolding in EFL/ESL education. By identifying the strengths and limitations of various scaffolding interventions, it contributes to the development of more effective, evidence-based teaching practices that can be adapted to different educational contexts. Educators should consider contextual factors such as learner characteristics and the educational environment when designing and implementing scaf-

folding strategies. Future research should explore innovative scaffolding techniques and their application in diverse and technologically rich classrooms.

In conclusion, scaffolding is a valuable tool in EFL/ESL education, with its effectiveness closely linked to the specific context in which it is applied. As educational environments continue to evolve, particularly with the increasing integration of technology, ongoing research and adaptation of scaffolding techniques will be crucial to meeting the changing needs of learners. This literature review serves as a foundational resource for guiding these efforts, offering insights that can inform both teaching practice and future research in the field.

### **Author contributions**

Conceptualisation, H.Z and C.K.S.S.; methodology, H.Z; writing—original draft preparation, H.Z.; writing—review and editing, H.Z and C.K.S.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials.

### **Conflicts of interest**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Acculturation Strategies Employed by Malaysian Students Studying Abroad

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### Abstract

Pursuing study overseas has always been one of the aspirations of Malaysian students to not only achieve their academic goals but also give them a chance to boost their intercultural communication competence in the long run. However, they often face various obstacles such as cultural barriers, academic strain, and psychological issues during their adjustment period. Therefore, acculturation strategies may be adopted to overcome various obstacles while learning abroad. Hence, this research aims to investigate the acculturation strategies employed by Malaysian international students studying abroad to overcome cultural conflicts. In this qualitative study, an in-depth interview was conducted with 6 Malaysian female students, specifically, 3 students from the United Kingdom and 3 students from Egypt, explores three key aspects: the preparations taken to study abroad, acculturation conflicts faced in the respective host countries and the acculturation strategies adopted by the students. The findings indicate that Malaysian students studying in the United Kingdom opted for an integration strategy while adjusting to the host culture. Two out of three participants studying in Egypt chose the integration strategy, whereas only one student adopted the separation strategy. It can be concluded that Malaysian students in the United Kingdom are more inclined to integrate to the Western culture compared to the students in the Eastern country (Egypt). The study offers recommendations for policymakers, higher education institutions, and prospective international students to enhance cross-cultural adaptation strategies.

**Keywords:** *Malaysia, international students, acculturation, host culture, acculturation strategies*

### Introduction

Researchers have been looking Malaysia is known as one of the top countries in the world which has the highest number of its citizens pursuing their study abroad. Malaysia ranked eighth out of the top ten countries that have their natives studying overseas as Malaysia Education and Training (2022) states that as of 2022, Malaysia has a total number of 59,144 students studying abroad. Numerous studies (Sisavath, 2021; Jackson & Oguro, 2017; Milian et al., 2015; Gan & Kang, 2022) have also shown that the reason most students want to continue their studies internationally is due to various benefits being offered that could assist in enhancing their career prospects and employability.

Acculturation signifies how immigrants and sojourners deal with the pressure rooted in the clashing of both cultures between the host and their home country (Ohnis et al., 1999 as cited in Yu & Wang, 2011). In the case of adaptation to studying abroad, despite numerous benefits and great opportunities awaiting the

students, pressure and distress are being imposed on them as well. Culture shock, psychological welfare, and academic struggles are the main issues that students face particularly during their adjustment stage (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019).

Although the number of Malaysian students who pursue their studies abroad has been increasing gradually over the years, their preference for acculturation strategies and the way they adapt to the distinctive host culture has yet to be studied extensively. Research also supported that there is a lack of research that specifically documents Malaysian international students' experience and the strategies that they adopted to overcome cultural boundaries (Kumar et al., 2019). This research will therefore focus on the acculturation strategies employed by Malaysian students abroad in adapting to a different culture.

Moreover, the transitional phase from home country to host country may lead to various cultural barriers during students' adjustment period to new surroundings, especially in countries that consist of multicultural societies. Students need to cooperate to achieve successful acculturation strategies in adapting themselves to the foreign culture that is particularly signified by diversity (Yu & Wang, 2011). Diversification in cultures may assist students to develop mastery of intercultural communication and thus, enhance their knowledge of other cultures. Research has proven that experience gained by international students overseas may enhance their global-mindedness, intercultural competence as well as personal development (Maharaja, 2018). Hence, students who acquire the ability to implement successful acculturation strategies may be able to deal with challenges and cultural barriers effectively while residing abroad. Therefore, the present aims to explore the acculturation strategies employed by Malaysian international students when studying at their respective host countries.

## **Literature Review**

The transition of moving from one's home country to another host country influences most international students to develop a bicultural identity. Schwartz et al. (2010) define biculturalism as the individuals' proficiency and capability to practise their cultural values while embracing the culture of the host country. This capability will lead to the development of one's dual identity that embraces both the host and home cultures. Based on Berry's Model of Acculturation (1980), the act of maintaining one's cultural practice while integrating into the host culture is seen as two independent dimensions. The crossover of these two dimensions leads to the development of four strategies of acculturation: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalisation. Drawing from this acculturation model, integration is depicted as bicultural as both terms represent the action of one retaining their cultural identity while embracing the culture of the host country (Meca et al., 2019).

The acculturation process among international studies varies depending on cultural contexts and individual preferences as demonstrated by studies such as Yu and Wang (2011). They highlight the preferences of acculturation strategies adopted by Chinese international students studying in Germany. Based on the survey conducted, it was found that the strategies of integration and separation are the most preferred acculturation approaches implemented by the Chinese students. The findings further reveal that male students are more inclined towards separation while female students primarily adopt integration. This study concludes that the acculturation patterns that emerged among the students are influenced by the distinct cross-cultural features of the two nations' psychological distance. However, the sample of this study may not be competently representative of the Chinese students who are studying in Germany due to the lack of diversity in the selection of the participants.

Krsmanovic (2020) investigated the social experiences of international freshman students in one of the public institutions in the Southeast United States of America by implementing Berry's Acculturation Model (1974,1980,1997). Ten international students were selected, and a descriptive research design was used to examine the degree to which each of the four strategies of the acculturation model, assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization, would emerge from the students' social experiences during their first year of study.

Cultural scholars and psychologists have acknowledged that embracing the values, beliefs, and customs of the host country does not completely imply that a newcomer will stop practising the culture of his or her homeland (Schwartz et al., 2010). The situation, however, might be different for some sojourners as they do not really possess the freedom to choose their preferred acculturation strategies when migrating to another foreign country. Berry (2005, in Fadil & Mohamad, 2022) concludes that the dominant culture, therefore, will influence and determine the employment of one's acculturation strategies. Henceforth, Berry's Model of Acculturation or also known as Berry's Fourfold Model was introduced to identify to what extent the sojourners will adopt their preferred acculturation strategies in adapting to the host environment. The model has divided the acculturation strategies into four aspects which are assimilation (adopting the host culture and rejecting their home culture), integration (maintaining one's home culture while adapting to the host culture), separation (maintaining one's home culture but rejecting the culture of the host country) and marginalisation (rejecting both of their home culture and the host). Berry's Model of Acculturation (1980) strategy is presented in Figure 1:

**Cultural Adaptation (relationship sought among groups)**

		<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
		Separation	Integration
<b>Maintenance of heritage culture</b>	<b>High</b>		
	<b>Low</b>	Marginalization	Assimilation

Figure 1: Berry's Model of Acculturation

Berry's theoretical model of acculturation strategies has been universally adopted in numerous studies (Yu & Wang, 2011; Krsmanovic, 2020; Luo et al., 2021) to investigate the preferences for acculturation strategies among international students studying abroad. Based on previous research, it was found that international students have different choices and solutions when it comes to the application of acculturation strategies when adjusting to the host environment and culture. Therefore, the adoption of 'Berry's Model of Acculturation' in this study is relevant as it is aligned with the research objective to identify the preference for acculturation strategies among Malaysian students studying abroad.

Alcott et al. (2017) describe the adaptation of the sojourners or immigrants towards a foreign culture into two fundamental dimensions: Dimension 1- the dominant culture or conserve their home culture and Dimension 2- engage with the local population. The concoction of these two dimensions leads to the formation of four distinctive acculturation strategies: assimilation (abandon one's home culture, adapt to the host culture, and engage with the local citizen); separation (retain one's home culture without practising the host culture and engaging with the local citizen); integration (retaining one's own culture and adapting to the host culture simultaneously); and marginalisation (rejecting both of the host culture and their own cultural identity).

## Methodology

The present study aims to identify the acculturation strategies employed by Malaysian students studying abroad by adopting a qualitative research design specifically a qualitative thematic analysis. A qualitative research design was adopted to gain a deep understanding and insights of the participants' perceptions, ide-

as, experiences, and the justification for their actions (Ugwu & Eze, 2023) and describe the complex details of the participants' viewpoints and behaviours in naturalistic surroundings (Perera, 2020).

A purposive sampling method was adopted for this study in selecting the research participants. This sampling technique has been broadly applied in qualitative studies to derive insights from individuals that are particularly knowledgeable about the phenomena of investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). In the present study, the participants who were purposively selected were Malaysian students currently studying abroad in Egypt and the universities in the United Kingdom.

In the present study, the first step was to seek participants that fulfilled the criterion specified which was Malaysian international students who are currently studying either in Egypt or the United Kingdom. The participants were identified from the researcher's close acquaintances of university friends who have connections with Malaysian students studying in foreign countries. Three Malaysian university students studying in Egypt and three Malaysian students studying in the United Kingdom agree to participate in the research. This study determined that the finalised sample size is sufficient for this research (Dworkin, 2012).

Participants were briefly briefed about the research purpose and consent forms were distributed to the interviewees to obtain their agreement in participating in the interview session and for their data to be used for research purposes. After obtaining the consent from the participants, the interview questions were shared one week before the scheduled interview. Date, time, and platform were then chosen and agreed upon by those involved to conduct the interview session online. In the present study, a semi-structured interview was adopted to gain deeper insights of the participants' perceptions on the subject matter. The interview approach allows the participants to elaborate on the topic being discussed in further detail (Alamri, 2019). This method is deemed suitable and useful in gaining in-depth information concerning the respondent's experience in using acculturation strategies. A total of 5 demographic questions and 14 questions related to acculturation strategies were developed for the purpose of the present research.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Malaysian Students Studying in the Kingdom and Egypt

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Foreign Country</b>	<b>Duration of Staying Abroad</b>
Sofia	22	Single	United Kingdom	4 years
Dhia	22	Single	United Kingdom	3 years
Lisa	22	Single	United Kingdom	3 years
Mariam	23	Married	Egypt	5 years
Nazira	24	Married	Egypt	6 years
Yasmin	23	Single	Egypt	3 years

An average duration of 1 hour was taken for each interview session and was conducted on the Google Meet video call platform. The interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. Due to privacy requirements, pseudonyms were adopted by the participants. Table 1 presents the participants' details which include their pseudonyms, ages, marital status, the foreign countries that they are currently studying in, and their duration of staying abroad.

In this study, the first step of analysis was to familiarise with the data obtained. Next, initial codes were generated from the data collected. In this study, codes such as "integrate" and "homesickness" were found in the raw data. The researcher then searched for the main themes to categorise the initial codes gained from the findings. For instance, one of the themes identified in this study was "acculturation conflicts faced by Malaysian students studying abroad". The emergence of the themes was later revised to avoid redundancy of the research themes. The process of defining and naming the themes that are aligned with the generated codes was then carried out. The final step was to produce a report according to the relevant themes and codes that highlighted the conflicts and the acculturation strategies employed by Malaysian international students studying abroad.

## **Findings**

This study examines the acculturation strategies of Malaysian students studying in the United Kingdom and Egypt, with a focus on three key objectives. The first research objective is to examine their preparation before departure and identify the cultural and social challenges that the participants experience. The final objective is to explore the acculturation strategies in response to these challenges.

Overall, the findings indicate that the Malaysian students studying abroad in the United Kingdom and Egypt employ varying strategies to adapt to their host environments. Their experiences are shaped by their level of preparation, the acculturation conflicts they face, and the strategies they adopt to navigate cultural differences. While students in the UK generally perceive the cultural gap to be minimal due to prior exposure to Western influences, students in Egypt encounter greater challenges, particularly in linguistic and social adaptation challenges. Despite these differences, most participants demonstrate a preference for integration which balances maintaining their home culture and adapting to the host culture. However, social and religious constraints influence their level of engagement, thus leading the participants to employ a separation strategy in specific contexts.

### **Research Objective 1**

The first research question that this study aims to address is how do Malaysian students prepare before studying abroad? This study determined that the extent of preparation among students varies based on their per-

ceived cultural proximity to the host country. While some students undertook active research to familiarise themselves with their new environment, others relied on indirect exposure through media and social networks. This pattern is particularly evident when comparing the participants' preparation experiences. The findings outlined two differences approaches that the participants use when preparing for their study in the UK and Egypt. Some students actively sought information about their host country before departure such as Lisa who took a more structured approach. Lisa mentioned that "*I researched British culture, customs, social etiquette, and even their education system before leaving. This helped me transition smoothly into the new environment.*" She conducts background research on British customs, education systems, and social etiquette to ease her transition.

In contrast, others relied on prior exposure through media, peers, and family. Most participants heading to the UK perceived minimal cultural differences, therefore, they prepared less extensively. Sofia and Dhia, for instance, did not conduct formal research before leaving Malaysia, believing that exposure to Western media had already familiarised them with British culture. Dhia also relied on seniors' experiences via social media.

*"I think there is nothing in particular that I did research on because I think as we grew up in Malaysia, we have been accustomed to the Western side."* (Sofia)

*"...the preparation that I did was very limited, just like since our seniors would definitely go to the UK, I just contacted them and asked, "How is it there?" and looked up their social media stories and observed how they were adapting, and those were the only things that I did before going to the UK."* (Dhia)

Similarly, students bound for Egypt did not conduct extensive background research, relying instead on word-of-mouth information from seniors and family members. Mariam and Yasmin noted that their understanding of Egyptian culture was based on brief pre-departure briefings and conversations with seniors.

*"I've only heard stories from seniors and officers in charge during my pre-departure program, but everything was only mentioned briefly."* (Mariam)

*"I just knew about Egyptian culture from my seniors. They told us to expect the worst first."* (Yasmin)

Nazira, however, took an additional step by watching YouTube videos to better visualise the social normal and lifestyle of Egypt.

*"I watched YouTube to see and imagine the surroundings here in Egypt. I also asked my cousins and relatives who had studied here before about their experiences."* (Nazira)

These findings suggest that students who perceive greater cultural differences (e.g., Lisa and Nazira) tend to prepare more actively, whereas those who assume cultural familiarity (e.g., Sofia and Dhia) adopt a more relaxed approach. Thus, while most students across both countries did not engage in extensive research, those in Egypt demonstrated a slightly greater awareness of potential adaptation difficulties, prompting more proactive engagement with cultural learning tools.

## **Research Objective 2**

This study also investigates the challenges that Malaysian international students face while adapting to their host countries. This study determined that regardless of their level of preparation, all participants encountered acculturation conflicts upon arrival. These challenges can be categorised into three key areas: (1) differences in cultural and social norms, (2) language barriers (Egypt-specific), and (3) psychological and emotional distress.

One of the most significant differences in cultural norms in the UK was the drinking culture, which serves as a primary mode of social bonding. Muslim students found this difficult to navigate, as their inability to participate in pub gatherings limited their interactions with local peers. Sofia mentions that *"Drinking is a big part of their social life. Since I don't drink, it limits how I interact with them"* and is further reiterated by Dhia who says that *"They invited me for a pre-drink, and I didn't know what that was. When I realised it involved alcohol, I knew I couldn't join them."* Meanwhile, in Egypt, students faced different cultural challenges, including aggressive traffic behaviors and relaxed attitudes toward household etiquette. As mentioned by Yasmin, *"Egyptians honk their horns constantly, even in heavy traffic. It's noisy and hectic."* Another interesting difference was articulated by Marian who says that *"it feels awkward visiting an Egyptian home and keeping my shoes on."*

The second challenge experienced by the research participants is the language barrier. Unlike students in the UK, those in Egypt encountered linguistic barriers due to the difference between formal Arabic (Fusha) and colloquial Egyptian Arabic (Amiyah) as Mariam highlighted *"Egyptians don't speak formal Arabic (Fusha) but a colloquial dialect (Amiyah), which made it hard to communicate."* In addition to cultural differences and language barriers, students in both countries face emotional stress, isolation, and homesickness. *"At home, everything was planned for me. Here, I have to handle everything on my own, and it was overwhelming at first"* as told by Dhia. Mariam concurs by outlining that *"Studying abroad is a lonely journey. Some days, the loneliness kills you."*

The findings indicate that Malaysian students studying abroad encounter acculturation conflicts that vary significantly based on their host country's cultural, linguistic, and social structures. Students in the UK primarily faced challenges related to social integration, particularly the drinking culture and differences in communication etiquette, which created barriers to forming deeper relationships with local peers. However, the absence of language barriers and the UK's multicultural environment allowed them to navigate these challenges with relative ease. On the other hand, students in Egypt encountered greater structural and linguistic adaptation difficulties, particularly in learning the colloquial Arabic dialect (Amiyah), adjusting to different social norms, and managing unexpected interpersonal conflicts. Across both settings, psychological and emotional distress was a common experience, as students struggled with homesickness, academic pressure, and the shift to independent living.

### **Research Objective 3**

Given the diverse challenges faced by Malaysian students in both the United Kingdom (UK) and Egypt, their ability to navigate and adapt to their host environments is largely shaped by the acculturation strategies they employ. Using Berry's (1980) Acculturation Framework, this study identified integration as the dominant strategy, where students balance maintaining their home culture while adopting aspects of the host culture. However, individual differences, religious beliefs, and the host country's sociocultural environment influence the extent to which they engage with the dominant culture. In the UK, the multicultural nature of society and the relative openness of locals to diverse cultural practices facilitate smoother integration. In contrast, students in Egypt, who face greater linguistic and social adaptation challenges, display a mix of integration and separation strategies, with some choosing to retain their Malaysian cultural identity more strongly in response to local customs they find difficult to adapt to.

Students in both the UK and Egypt demonstrated integration strategies, where they balanced engagement with the host culture while maintaining aspects of their home culture. Sofia emphasised adaptability while maintaining boundaries, showcasing a flexible integration approach:

*"I think that I adapt differently to the host culture. But I think when adapting to a host culture, it is important to try to fit in with them and also know your boundaries. For example, if I go to a local's house and they say it's okay, you can wear your shoes, of course, I'm going to take off my shoes. But because it is their home and if they are comfortable with it, I will adapt to them accordingly."*

This suggests that students are willing to adjust their behavior to respect the norms of the host society, but they also retain their own cultural preferences when possible. Similarly, Dhia expressed willingness to integrate through alternative social interactions, despite avoiding alcohol-related social gatherings:

*"...some of their cultures are totally against my belief as a Muslim. But, I will always try to adapt to the culture here and socialise with the locals without having to step out of my boundary and going against my cultural and religious beliefs. One of the things that I have done is by doing simple gestures, by asking them to have a walk at the park and to do some outdoor activities together without having to wait for chances to happen."*

This highlights how religious boundaries shape acculturation as the research participants studying in the UK prefer integration in non-religious aspects while maintaining separation in practices that contradict their beliefs. Nazira, an international student in Egypt, also embraced integration by adopting selective cultural practices, ensuring that she absorbs only positive elements from the local culture:

*"I just normally take what is good and leave what is bad. Like for example, the good aspects of the people, the language, and some special styles to interact with the people, and yes, I believe it is the best approach to help adjust to the environment."*

Mariam also acknowledged the necessity of adapting to some aspects of the host culture, although she retained strong elements of her home identity. Her statement suggests that acculturation is a process of negotiation, where students adopt aspects that aid daily life while resisting the parts that they find incompatible:

*"I cannot deny there are a few occasions where I need to opt and practise the host culture in my daily situation as it is needed for me to go through the day. Nevertheless, there are still many more of the host culture that I didn't adapt to as it differs from mine. So it's both yes and no. Did the approaches help me adjust? Yes."*

While integration was the dominant strategy, separation was observed in specific social contexts, particularly where students felt cultural dissonance or resistance to unfamiliar norms. Yasmin expressed a strong preference for retaining her home cultural practices, particularly in social interactions and rule-following:

*"However, in terms of social practices, I am more comfortable in retaining our home cultural practices, where most of the time we tend to tolerate and negotiate in solving a problem rather than arguing. Furthermore, we also tend to abide more by the rules compared to the*

*Egyptian people, who are more on doing things according to their way. For instance, during the COVID-19 era, even doctors did not wear masks at the hospitals and also when treating the patients. It is completely in contrast to us, who are very particular and strict when it comes to wearing masks during the pandemic era."*

This suggests that when the participants find a mismatch in values, they choose to separate rather than integrate, particularly in areas concerning safety, health, and ethical practices. Sofia, despite being open to adapting to certain contexts, firmly maintained cultural separation in others, particularly concerning food and religious restrictions:

*"But, in terms of foods and all the drinking, I think that's where I put my boundaries to retain my home culture instead of adapting to the host culture. And I think that when you move to a foreign country, you have to find the exact spot between being able to fit in with the norm but also understanding your own boundaries. But I think that everyone in this world has already understood that different cultures have different understandings, so people tend to respect it."*

Therefore, this study identified that integration is the preferred acculturation strategy, but personal boundaries, religious beliefs, and social norms influence the extent of cultural engagement. While some students actively embrace host-country customs, others retain a selective distance in specific social contexts.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The study aims to identify the acculturation strategies used among Malaysian international students studying in the United Kingdom and Egypt. By adopting a thematic analysis approach, the data were qualitatively analysed based on a total sample of six participants, three Malaysian students studying in the United Kingdom and another three studying in Egypt. This study identified three key aspects influencing acculturation: preparations before departure, acculturation conflicts, and acculturation strategies employed by students abroad. The findings suggest that students who perceived a greater cultural gap between Malaysia and the host country engaged in more deliberate preparation, while those who assumed cultural familiarity, particularly students in the UK, prepared less formally. These observations are consistent with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions, which suggest that societies with a lower uncertainty avoidance index, such as Malaysia, are more comfortable navigating ambiguous situations and adapting as they go. However, this lack of preparation sometimes contributed to initial cultural adjustment challenges, reinforcing Khanal and Gaulee's (2019) argument that one of the most significant obstacles faced by international students is a lack of precise pre-departure knowledge about the host country's academic and social expectations.

Acculturation conflicts were also central to the adaptation process, with students in both the UK and Egypt encountering significant sociocultural barriers. In the UK, participants struggled with drinking culture, informal communication with lecturers, and differences in social norms related to personal space and privacy, leading to initial discomfort in social interactions. These findings mirror studies such as Thurnell-Read et al. (2018) which emphasise how international students from collectivist cultures often have trouble adjusting to the more individualistic and informal social customs in Western countries. Meanwhile, students in Egypt faced language barriers due to differences between formal Arabic (Fusha) and the colloquial dialect (Amiyah), as well as challenges in adapting to different social behaviors and interpersonal norms. These findings align with previous studies (e.g., Cao et al., 2016; Smith, 2011; Yu et al., 2019) that highlight how language barriers remain one of the most persistent acculturative stressors among international students, particularly in non-English-speaking countries. Beyond linguistic and social challenges, all participants experienced psychological and emotional distress, including homesickness, academic pressure, and isolation, which further shaped their acculturation experiences. This is consistent with Yusof et al. (2018) that international students frequently face mental health challenges stemming from adjusting to a new cultural and academic environment.

Despite these challenges, most participants adopted an integration strategy, actively engaging with the host culture while maintaining their Malaysian cultural and religious identity. This reflects Yu and Wang's (2011) argument that integration is the most preferred acculturation strategy among international students, as it enables them to adapt to the local culture while simultaneously strengthening their intercultural competence. In the UK, students found it relatively easy to integrate, as British society is multicultural and generally receptive to diversity. The openness of the environment facilitated their ability to interact with locals while retaining aspects of their own cultural identity, which is supported by the findings of Mamat and Rambely (2016), who noted that Malaysian students in the UK often develop a broader worldview through cross-cultural exposure. However, religious considerations played a major role in shaping the depth of integration. Some students, such as Sofia and Dhia, deliberately avoided social settings that involved alcohol consumption but engaged in other activities that allowed them to form social connections without compromising their values. This indicates that acculturation is not a binary process of assimilation or rejection but a strategic negotiation of cultural boundaries, where students selectively adopt aspects of the host culture that align with their personal beliefs.

In Egypt, integration was more challenging due to linguistic and social adaptation barriers, leading some students to opt for partial separation strategies. While two participants adopted an integration approach, selectively engaging with aspects of the local culture that facilitated daily interactions, one participant chose separation, particularly in social settings where cultural norms diverged significantly from Ma-

Malaysian values. This finding is consistent with Krsmanovic's (2020) study, which found that students who perceive wide cultural disparities between themselves and the host country may deliberately limit their engagement with the local culture, particularly in contexts involving religious and ethical values. Yasmin, for example, resisted adopting certain local norms such as the informal approach to conflict resolution, preferring to retain Malaysian social customs that emphasise negotiation and rule adherence. This reflects the argument by Fortes and Araújo (2019) that students who adhere strongly to their home cultural norms may experience a greater sense of cultural misalignment, which impacts their willingness to integrate fully into the host environment.

The implications of these findings suggest that higher education institutions and policymakers play a crucial role in facilitating smoother acculturation experiences for international students. The findings reveal that many Malaysian students had little to no formal exposure to the academic, cultural, or social expectations of their host country prior to departure, which may have exacerbated their acculturation stress. This highlights the need for comprehensive pre-departure training programs that provide students with structured cultural awareness education, language preparation (especially for those studying in non-English-speaking countries), and psychological resilience training. Additionally, universities in both the UK and Egypt should enhance institutional support systems by implementing peer mentorship programs, cultural exchange initiatives, and academic guidance tailored to international students' needs. As suggested by Khanal and Gaulee (2019), such initiatives are critical in helping students navigate the complexities of cross-cultural adaptation and develop a stronger sense of belonging in their host institutions.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader discourse on international student mobility and acculturation by offering insights specific to Malaysian students, an area that remains relatively underexplored in existing literature. Future research should consider expanding the sample size to include Malaysian students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, studying in a wider range of countries, to capture a more comprehensive picture of acculturation preferences. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore how students' acculturation strategies evolve over time, particularly in relation to academic success, intercultural competence, and post-study career development. Understanding these long-term adaptation patterns would provide valuable insights for universities, policymakers, and international education stakeholders aiming to enhance the overall experience of Malaysian students abroad.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that while integration remains the preferred acculturation strategy, its implementation is influenced by sociocultural factors, institutional support, and personal values. While students in the UK found integration relatively seamless due to a multicultural and accepting environment, those in Egypt faced more adaptation challenges, leading to the adoption of mixed integration and separation strategies. These findings reinforce the need for targeted support structures that acknowledge both

the opportunities and barriers faced by Malaysian students abroad, ensuring that they are equipped with the cultural competence, psychological resilience, and academic preparedness necessary to thrive in an international environment.

### **Author contributions**

Conceptualisation, U.M.U.M.; methodology, U.M.U.M.; formal analysis, U.M.U.M.; original draft preparation, U.M.U.M.; supervision, Z.B.H.; writing—review and editing, Z.B.H., N.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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### **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Z.B.H, upon reasonable request.

### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## The Oral Communicative Strategies of University Engineering Students in the South-Western Nigeria

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### Abstract

This study was an attempt to explore the oral communicative strategies employed by a group of South-Western Nigerian undergraduate engineering students to navigate communication breakdowns during English interactions. A survey adapted from Alahmed (2017) was administered to a sample of 316 respondents across five public universities in South-Western Nigeria. Using The descriptive analysis reveal that the participants use a variety of oral communicative strategies (ranging from avoidance, paraphrase, conscious transfer, appeal for assistance and mime, stalling mechanisms, self-repair devices and meaning negotiation strategies). Mime and negotiation for meaning were frequently used, while word coinage was least employed. Further research is recommended to generalize findings to a broader Nigerian ESL learner population. This study aims to inform pedagogical practices for university-level engineering students, language education policymakers, and language instructors on integrating communication strategies to enhance communicative competence.

**Keywords:** *Oral Communicative Strategies; South-Western Nigerian university engineering students; higher education*

### Introduction

A review of the literature reveals that L2 spoken discourse frequently incorporates various communicative strategies, including accuracy-oriented strategies, fluency strategies, meaning negotiation strategies, hesitation devices/pause fillers, message abandonment, language switching, and foreignizing. Speakers utilize these strategies to address challenges arising during conversational exchanges or message delivery (Abdullateef Solihu et al., 2023; Namaziadost & Imani, 2020; Suwartono & Kerti, 2020).

Importantly, communication strategy use is influenced by several factors, most notably gender (Harare, 2019; Janan, 2022), language proficiency (Asma & Avan, 2022; Mansyera & Zainil, 2019), and exposure (e.g., Abdullateef Solihu et al., 2023; Benali and Lopez, 2021).

Regarding frequency, some studies suggest no significant gender differences in communication strategy use (e.g., Fadil & Ratmanida, 2022; Noor Rachmawaty et al., 2021). However, more recent research indicates gendered preferences for specific strategies. For example, Harare (2019) found that females tend to employ socio-cognitive strategies more than males, while Janan (2022) observed male preference for code-

switching and female preference for replacement strategies. Mael and Kitano (2023) discuss communication strategies employed by Japanese language learners at the basic level, noting their resourcefulness in overcoming linguistic limitations, and researchers such as Tarone (1981), Faerch and Kasper (1983), and Dornyei (1995) provide a theoretical framework for understanding strategic competence in communication, mentioning factors such as limited linguistic resources and the role of these strategies in maintaining smooth conversation.

Research has consistently reported that ESL/EFL learners with high English proficiency tend to use more communication strategies than their lower-proficiency counterparts (e.g. Asma & Avan, 2022; Mansyera & Zainil, 2019). On top of that, there have been numerous studies demonstrating that systematic strategy instruction enhances L2 learners' strategic awareness, leading to an improvement in learners' communication strategy use and overall communicative competence (e.g. Abdullateef Solihu et al., 2023; Benali and Lopez, 2021; Pinphet & Wasanasomsithi, 2022).

Alsadat Mir and Shirkhani (2020) investigated the oral communication tactics utilized by a cohort of Iranian intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, alongside the correlation between these tactics, learners' self-efficacy beliefs, and anxiety levels. Data, gathered from 160 EFL learners, were elicited using three questionnaires: Nakatani's (2005) Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI), Horwitz et al.'s (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), and a general self-efficacy questionnaire developed by Nezami et al. (1996). The study revealed that accuracy-focused strategies were predominantly employed by learners, while message abandonment was identified as the least frequently used speaking strategy.

Likewise, Kaothong and Kongsom (2021) explored the kinds of oral communication strategies adopted by Thai working engineers in coping with foreigners at the workplace, and the different strategies they frequently use in dealing with different workplace communicative events. Using the Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI) from Dörnyei and Scott's (1997) taxonomy of communication strategies, data were obtained from a group of 108 engineers working at manufacturing factories. In terms of the communication strategies used to cope with foreigners, the findings revealed that the participants employed all the strategies in the OCSI, with direct strategies emerging as the most frequently used category, followed by interactional and indirect strategies respectively. Specifically, the participants were found using self-repair and approximation the most. Nevertheless, as for the types of communication strategies used to deal with different workplace communicative events, the results showed that participants used all the oral communication strategies included in the OCSI, with self-repair being the most frequently used strategy and foreignising being the least frequently used one.

At this juncture, it is worth to note that the reports on accuracy-oriented strategies being the most frequently used of all communicative strategies (e.g. Alsadat Mir & Shirkhani, 2020; Kaothong & Kongsom,

2021) are an indication that the users involved tend to give priority to correctness in terms of structures, grammar and pronunciation over fluency in speaking. This learners' obviously held standpoint may have had its source from the traditional approach which is still in practice today in several language teaching and learning environments, despite recent research which emphasise the necessity of transitioning from such a pedagogy to communicative language approaches which centres on developing learners' communicative competence (Nggawu & Thao, 2023). Therefore, improving ESL learners' awareness towards using more fluency-oriented strategies is necessary as that will actually boost their speaking fluency and thereby enhance their speaking performance.

Belaman et al. (2022) undertook a study to find out the communication strategies used by Malay ESL learners in oral presentations and the factors leading to fear of oral presentation. Using an adapted questionnaire from Endler (1980) and Yaman and Kavasoglu (2013), the researchers elicited perceptions in regard to the two variables from a group of 210 students who were taken from a Malaysian public university. The findings show that in their effort to compensate for communication breakdown during oral presentations, the respondents largely employ message reduction, orientation and non-verbal strategies the most, while they moderately used fluency and accuracy-oriented strategies, and meaning negotiation strategies. Nevertheless, they used social affective strategies the least. With reference to the second variable, internal factors (such as fear of audience, presentation room setup, fear of obtaining low marks) and internal factors (like trait apprehension, insufficient preparation, lack of presentation skills, being forgetful of the correct vocabulary, large audience and feeling of inferiority) were found as leading to the respondents' fear of oral presentation.

Although they are not generalizable on the whole Malaysian ESL learners, the findings of this research imply that the participants are English users of low proficiency, given their conspicuous preference for message reduction and non-verbal strategies and their obvious limited capability to use social affective strategies which entail the use of the target language to compensate for communication breakdown.

In the same Malaysian context, Zamani et al. (2022) carried out a study to explore the oral communication strategies employed by a cohort of Malay students in classroom context. Using a questionnaire that is based on both interactional and psycholinguistic approaches to communication strategies, the researchers collected data from 56 respondents who were purposively chosen from engineering and business studies faculties at a Malaysian university. The findings showed that respondents used a variety of oral communication strategies to compensate for communication breakdown, but with more dependence on the interactional-based communication strategies (i.e. social-affective strategies and fluency-oriented strategies) than the psycholinguistic-based ones (i.e. negotiation for meaning strategies, accuracy-oriented strategies, and message reduction, orientation and non-verbal strategies).

This study delves into an important aspect of oral communication strategies, namely comparison between the respondents' use of interactional communication strategies and psycholinguistic ones. In actual

fact, not much research has been conducted in this regard. Nevertheless, the study fails to compare and contrast between the two categories of respondents used since they were not of the same educational background. Hence, there is a need to have new studies to further address this aspect.

Furthermore, Wan Hassan (2022) carried out their study to examine the use of fillers by Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) staff candidates during a recruitment process. This study obtained its data through an observation of a video recorded during a job interview of a group of 19 UiTM Malay staff candidates. Having used NVivo software (version 12) to analyse the elicited data, the researcher found that pause fillers were extensively used by the participants and are observed to be tremendously helpful to them in maintaining the available lexical items while endeavouring to achieve particular communicative goals.

Although this study was carefully conducted given its research design and the instrument used to analyse the obtained data, examining other communication strategies used by the respondents would have added more information about the use of communication strategies among Malays which could enlighten language educators on which communication strategies need to be taught to students. Therefore, for more impactful findings and implications, there is a need for more studies to centre upon a wide variety of communication strategies employed by Malay ESL learners.

Pratama and Zainil (2020) also carried out a study to examine the oral communication strategies used by a group of EFL learners at a faculty of education in an Indonesian university. Using a qualitative research design, the researchers obtained data through an observation of classroom discussions held by a group of 20 fourth year students from the faculty of education at an Indonesian university. The obtained data were then analysed according to the Kongsom's (2009) taxonomy of communication strategies. The findings revealed that the respondents used 13 kinds of communication strategies, 12 of which are included in the Kongsom's (2009) taxonomy, while the 13th strategy was identified as self-repetition. As earlier identified, self-repetition is all about the speaker repeating a word or strings of words which they have just uttered (Dornyei & Scott, 1997; Rababah, 2001). Out of the 13 communication strategies found, the most frequently used were pause fillers and hesitation devices, while the least frequently used were comprehension check, non-linguistic strategy and literal translation.

This study is in fact thorough in its method of addressing the issue in question. Its use of observation has actually led to more empirical findings. However, given the small number of respondents, new studies with larger samples of respondents are required to address the phenomenon with more thoroughness.

While L2 learners' awareness on communication strategies is an important factor which helps to effectively address the problems that usually leads to a communication breakdown, this research aims to explore the oral communication strategies that the South-western Nigerian university engineering students use in an effort to circumvent communication breakdowns amidst speech interactions and productions. It is designed to inform learners on the need to be aware of these strategies and their use in daily communications.

On top of that, it is hoped to inform language teachers of the need to realize the significance of promoting the teaching of strategic competence as part of the components that make up competence in communication.

Ever since the conduction of the recent quasi-experimental study to find out the impact of teaching oral communication strategies on South-Western Nigerian engineering students (Abdullateef Solihu, Normah & Abdul Azim, 2023), the authors, being driven by curiosity, have got the impetus to further explore the students' awareness of these communication strategies through a larger sample of respondents from the region so as to arrive at findings whose implications can be more generalizable on the entire population of engineering students in the region.

In addition to the Tarone's (1977) taxonomy of communication strategies adopted in the previous research, this study goes extra miles to adopt a collection of Tarone's (1977) traditional theory, Tarone's (1980) interactional theory and Dornyei's (1995) extended theory. This shall be further explained later in this paper.

### Theoretical Framework

In a quest to find out and categorize the communicative strategies used by university engineering students in the South-Western Nigeria in their efforts to prevent communication breakdowns amidst speech interactions and productions, this study adopted a combination of Tarone's (1977) traditional theory, Tarone's (1980) interactional theory and Dornyei's (1995) extended theory.

To sum up, Table 1 presents the main items embodied in the present research's theoretical framework.

Table 1: Communication Strategies as Adapted from Tarone (1997 & 1980) and Dornyei's (1995)

No.	Communication Strategy	Description
1.	Topic Avoidance	The learner avoids talking about topics which they do not have enough vocabulary to express.
2.	Message Abandonment	The learner starts to address a topic but he/she suddenly abandons the speech due to lack of vocabulary to complete the message.
3.	Approximation	The learner uses lexical items known to be incorrect but closely related in meaning to the correct words (e.g. pipe for water pipe).
4.	Word Coinage	The learner invents new words while in an effort to communicate a given concept (e.g. air ball for balloon).

**The Oral Communicative Strategies of University Engineering Students in the South-Western Nigeria**

5.	Circumlocution	The learner gives a description of an object when he/she forgets or does not know the right word (e.g. She is, uh, smoking something. I don't know its name. That's, uh, Persian, and we use it in Turkey, a lot of).
6.	Literal Translation	The learner resorts to the literal translation of a concept from his/her first language to target language (e.g. "He invites him to drink, for they toast one another.")
7.	Language Switch	The learner turns to his/her first language to express a concept due to insufficient lexical items with which to express it in the target language (e.g. balon for balloon).
8.	Appeal for Assistance	The learner politely asks the audience for the correct term to be used (e.g. What is this? What is it called?)
9.	Mime	The learner uses a non-verbal language (such as body language and gestures) to express a meaning (e.g. clapping one's hand to express applause).
10.	Stalling Mechanisms	The learner employs certain devices (e.g. 'em', 'er') to fill a pause in speech while trying to gain time to think of the right lexical items to be used.
11.	Self-Repair Devices	The learner corrects the errors in speech which can adversely affect the message conveyed.
12.	Meaning Negotiation	The learner makes an effort (e.g. asking if they understand the message) to ensure a mutual understanding of the intended message between the interlocutors.

**Methodology**

This study employed a quantitative method to identify and categorise the oral communication strategies which the targeted ESL learners employed in their endeavour to resolve communication breakdown issues amidst their communication interactions and productions. Therefore, the below sub-sections provide details about the participants of the study, the data collection instrument, the data collection process, and data analysis.

**Participants**

Undergraduate engineering students from four public universities in South-West Nigeria were selected as the participants of this study. Their age ranges from 18 to 26 years old. They are mainly indigenes of Yoruba, one of the three main Nigerian tribes whose mother tongue is Yoruba. Their experience as L2 English users began in upper primary school when English became the medium of instruction for all subjects, in addition to being a core language subject. Upon completing secondary education, these students took three categories of English-based assessments required for university admission.

Given the difficulties in accessing the entire student population due to time, budget, and resource limitations (Bartlett, Kotrlik, & Higgins, as cited by Memon et al., 2020; Bryman, 2016), a non-probability sampling approach was adopted, focusing on readily available participants. Specifically, convenience sampling was employed to gather data from 316 participants enrolled in engineering faculties at four public universities within the research area. Convenience sampling (also known as incidental or accidental sampling) involves selecting participants based on their ease of access and availability (Pandey & Pandey, 2015; Saunders et al., 2012).

### **Instrument**

Pandey and Pandey (2015) define questionnaire as “a form prepared and distributed to secure responses to certain questions” (p. 58). Mohajan (2020) affirms that the use of questionnaires allows the researcher to easily gather a great deal of quantifiable data from respondents without much cost. A self-reporting communication strategies questionnaire designed by Alahmed (2017) communication strategies was adapted to gather information about the participants’ demography and information on their ways of circumventing communication breakdown amidst interactions and message productions. It is worth to note that the questionnaire was adapted to better suit the study’s oral communication strategies’ framework which comprises Tarone’s (1977) traditional theory, Tarone’s (1980) interactional theory and Dornyei’s (1995) communication strategies theory explained in the previous chapter.

Subsequently, the questionnaire underwent content validation by three experts: a psychometrician and two research experts specializing in the present research area. Following their assessment, minor modifications were incorporated into the final version. Internal consistency was then assessed through a pilot study with eight undergraduate engineering students at a public university in Lagos State, southwestern Nigeria. The resulting Cronbach's alpha of 0.764 indicates acceptable reliability. The questionnaire is included in the appendix.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Following satisfactory validation and reliability testing, the adapted questionnaire was administered online using Google Forms for ease of access and broad distribution. Dissemination through various social media platforms frequented by the target population maximized reach, exceeding what would have been feasible through manual distribution. Granello and Wheaton (2004) discuss the growing popularity and methodological considerations of online data collection. The advantages among others include lower cost, faster response, and design flexibility.

## Data Analysis Procedure

The questionnaire responses, focusing on communication strategies employed by participants to circumvent communication breakdowns, were collected via Google Forms and subsequently analysed using SPSS (version 29). Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated, and the data are presented in bar charts.

## Findings and Discussions

Using descriptive analysis with graphical representations, this section presents the analysis of the data obtained from the participants. In other words, the following paragraphs are designed to provide details on the oral communication strategies that the participants reported themselves using in an effort to circumvent communication breakdowns amidst interactions and message productions. Using bar charts, the analyzed data are reported in the form of means and are further presented using bar charts. In order to have a more detailed analysis of the participants' use of the above communicative strategies, each strategy, with its constituents, is presented as follows.

### Topic Avoidance

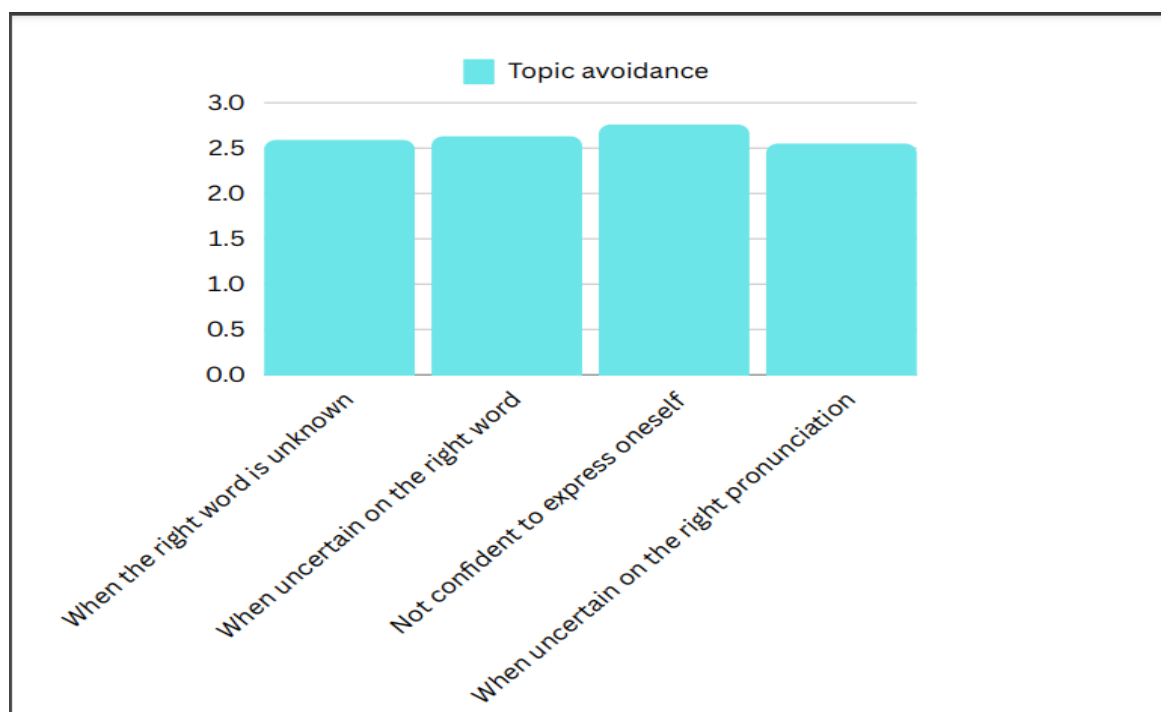


Chart 1: Participants' Use of Topic Avoidance

The participants self-rated their use of topic avoidance in four different situations as shown in Chart

1. To begin with, the participants reported their recourse to topic avoidance as a result of not knowing the

right English word (i.e. When I do not know the correct English words to use, I avoid talking about a particular topic or concept) at the mean score of  $M=2.59$ . Moreover, their use of topic avoidance due to uncertainty regarding whether the words they know are appropriate enough to communicate a particular concept/topic (i.e. When I am not sure of the right terminology to be used, I avoid talking about a particular topic or concept) reported at  $M=2.63$ . Similarly, resorting to topic avoidance due to anxiety/lack of confidence to express a given topic (i.e. When I am not confident enough to express it well, I avoid talking about a particular topic or concept) reported at  $M=2.76$ . Ultimately, the participants reported their employment of topic avoidance due to uncertainty regarding the accurate pronunciation of the terms involved in conveying a message (i.e. When I am not sure about the right pronunciation of the key terms involved, I avoid talking about a particular topic) at the means of  $M=2.55$ .

Conclusively, given its overall mean score,  $M=2.63$ , topic avoidance was showcased by participants as one of the communication strategies to which they sometimes have a recourse when they are faced with difficulty posed by linguistic resource deficit in the course of an attempt to communicate with others in English.

### Message Abandonment

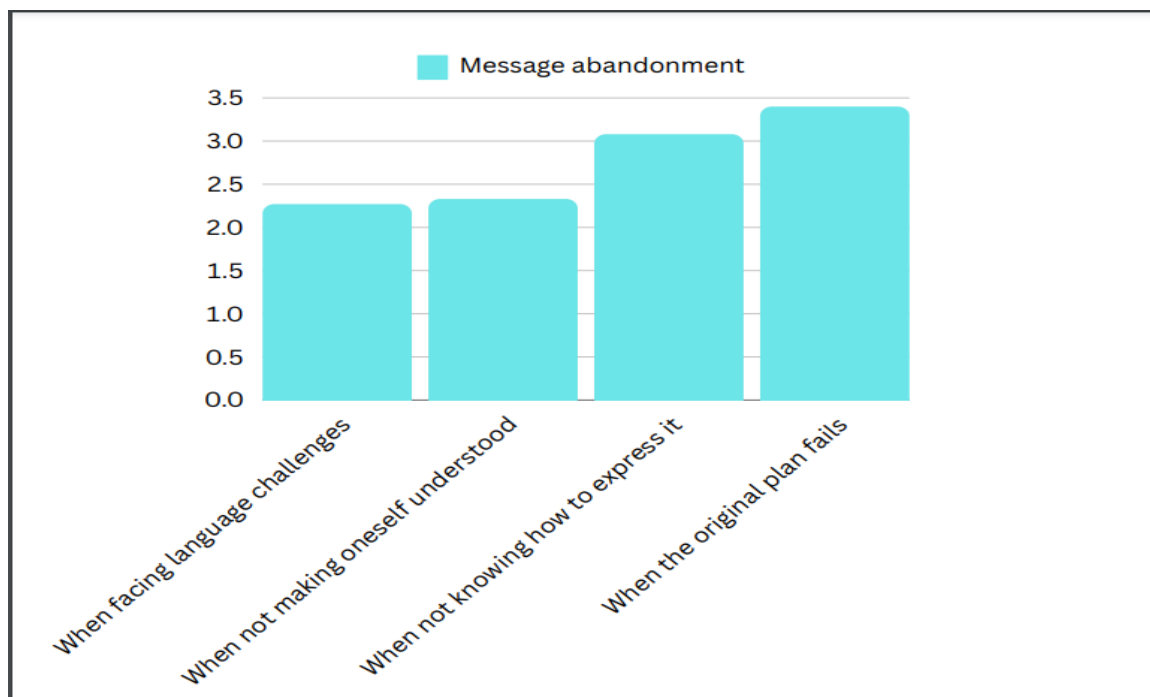


Chart 2: Participants' Use of Message Abandonment

Chart 2 presents the mean at which the participants use message abandonment amidst their interactions and message productions in English. Here, the participants showed four situations in which they resort

to message abandonment, and they rated the frequency at which they find themselves in each of the situations.

With the mean scores of  $M=2.27$  and  $M=2.33$  respectively, the participants reported themselves as ‘rarely’ using message abandonment once they begin to experience language challenges (i.e. I leave the intended message uncompleted once I start to encounter some language challenges) and when they feel that they cannot make themselves understood to the audience (i.e. I give up the intended message when I can’t make myself understood to the audience). However, their frequency of resorting to this strategy slightly increases to the mean scores of  $M=3.08$  and  $M=3.40$  respectively when they report themselves as ‘sometimes’ having a recourse to message abandonment due to not knowing how to express a particular concept/topic (i.e. When I don’t know how to express it, I abandon my original verbal plan and just say some words instead) and when the original plan for communicating an idea fails (i.e. I set up a new speech-plan when the original one fails).

In conclusion, considering its overall mean score,  $M=2.77$ , message abandonment represents an integral part of the participants’ strategic competence as they resort to it at intervals (i.e. sometimes) in an endeavor to circumvent communication difficulty that comes their way amidst message conveyance.

### Approximation

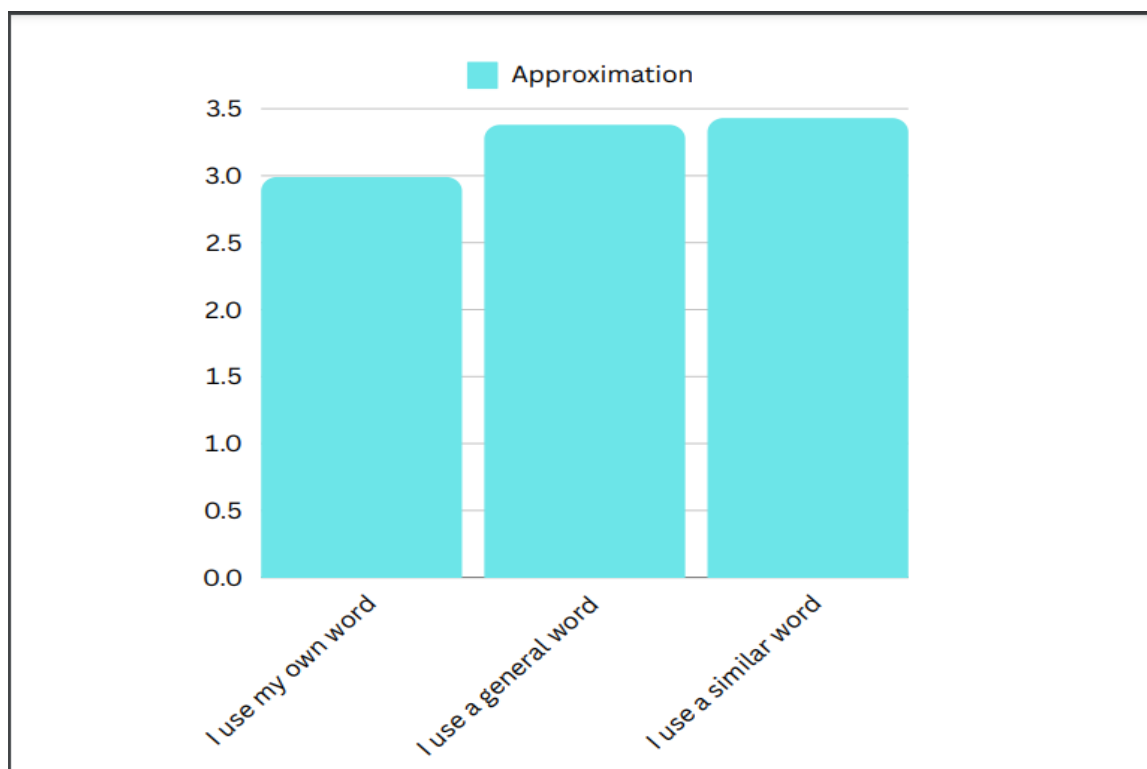


Chart 3: Participants’ Use of Approximation

Chart 3 above presents the participants' self-reported mean of their recourse to approximation with a view to tackling the imminent communication breakdown in the course of speaking interactions and productions. When they do not know or they are forgetful of the correct words to be used, the participants reported themselves as using the following sub-approximation strategies to handle the situation, namely coining their own words, using general words in place of specific ones, and using words similar in meaning to the coined terms.

Given the mean score of  $M=2.99$ , the participants reported themselves as 'sometimes' coining their own words (i.e. When I do not know the coined term to be used in a particular situation, I use my own word. For example, I use "manmade genius" instead of "artificial intelligence) when they are forgetful or lack the knowledge of the coined terms to be used in the course of communicating a concept or topic. Similarly, with the mean score of  $M=3.38$ , they reported that they 'sometimes' have a recourse to general words as an indication of the specific words they are forgetful of or they lack the knowledge of (i.e. I use a general word like "something", "stuff" to refer to an English word which I do not know). Likewise, with the mean score of  $M=3.43$ , they also reported that they 'sometimes' employ words with similar meaning to the most appropriate words (i.e. When I do not know the right English word, I use a word with a similar meaning. For example, I use "boat" instead of "ship").

To sum up, taking its overall mean score of  $M=3.27$  into consideration, approximation emerge as an inseparable part of the participants' strategic competence as they 'sometimes' find it useful in resolving the communication crisis arising from forgetfulness or lack of knowledge of the right terminology with which to communicate a concept or topic.

### **Word Coinage**

The mean of participants' recourse to word coinage amidst communication interactions and productions is presented in chart 4. When faced with a difficulty which requires a recourse to word coinage, there are three sub-word coinage strategies which the participants reported themselves using, namely inventing non-existing English words, foreignizing Yoruba words, forming new words based on an existing rule.

Given the mean score of  $M=2.68$ , the participants reported themselves as 'sometimes' inventing non-existing English words to solve crisis which could lead to an eventual communication breakdown (i.e. If I do not know the right English word, I invent a non-existing English word to communicate my idea. For example, "Airball" for "Balloon"). However, with the mean score of  $M=2.59$ , they reported themselves as 'rarely' using Yoruba words pronounced in an English accent (i.e. I use a Yoruba word pronounced in an English accent when I have difficulty using the right English word) to handle the challenge of an impending communication breakdown. Similarly, at the mean score of  $M=2.37$ , the participants self-rated themselves as

‘rarely’ resorting to formation of words according to a supposed rule (i.e. I make up a non-existing English word on the basis of a supposed rule (e.g. *vegetarianism* for *vegetarian*).

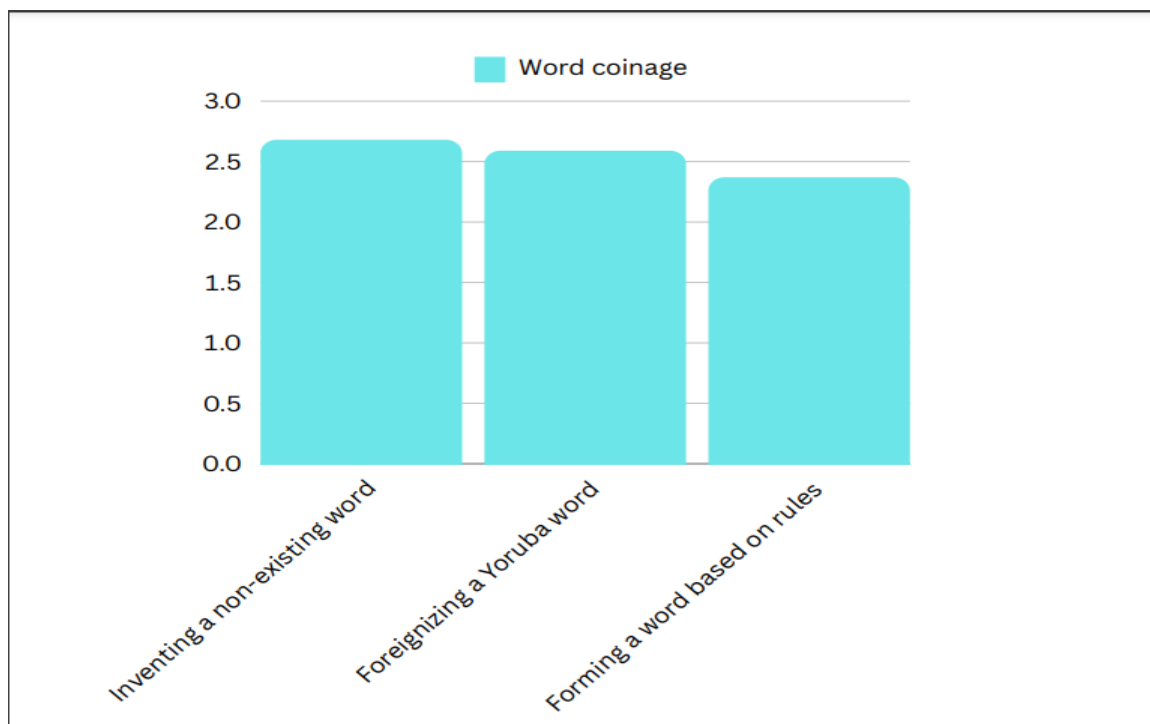


Chart 4: Participants' Use of Word Coinage

To conclude, given its overall mean score which is  $M=2.54$ , word coinage is considered among the communicative strategies employed by participants although it is used in rare cases of their attempts to circumvent an impending communication breakdown.

### Circumlocution

Chart 5 presents the participants' self-reported use of circumlocution when it becomes necessary to use multiple words to express a meaning due to unavailability of the direct vocabulary to address it. The participants reported their use of circumlocution in three ways, namely making illustrations, giving descriptions, and making a sound imitation of the item in question.

Given the mean score  $M=3.53$ , the participants recorded themselves as ‘often’ using illustrations when they do not know how to express a concept (i.e. When I do not know how to present my idea in English, I give examples to explain it). Similarly, at the frequency mean score  $M=3.69$ , the participants reported that they ‘often’ give a description of the item in question when they fail to recall the term to indicate it (i.e. When I do not know how to say the English word to be used, I describe what the object looks like or what it is used for). The third component which is the use of a sound to imitate the object in question (i.e. I make a

sound imitation of something if I do not know the right word for it in English) was self-rated as slightly minimal as the participants affirmed that they ‘sometimes’ ( $M=2.86$ ) have a recourse to it.

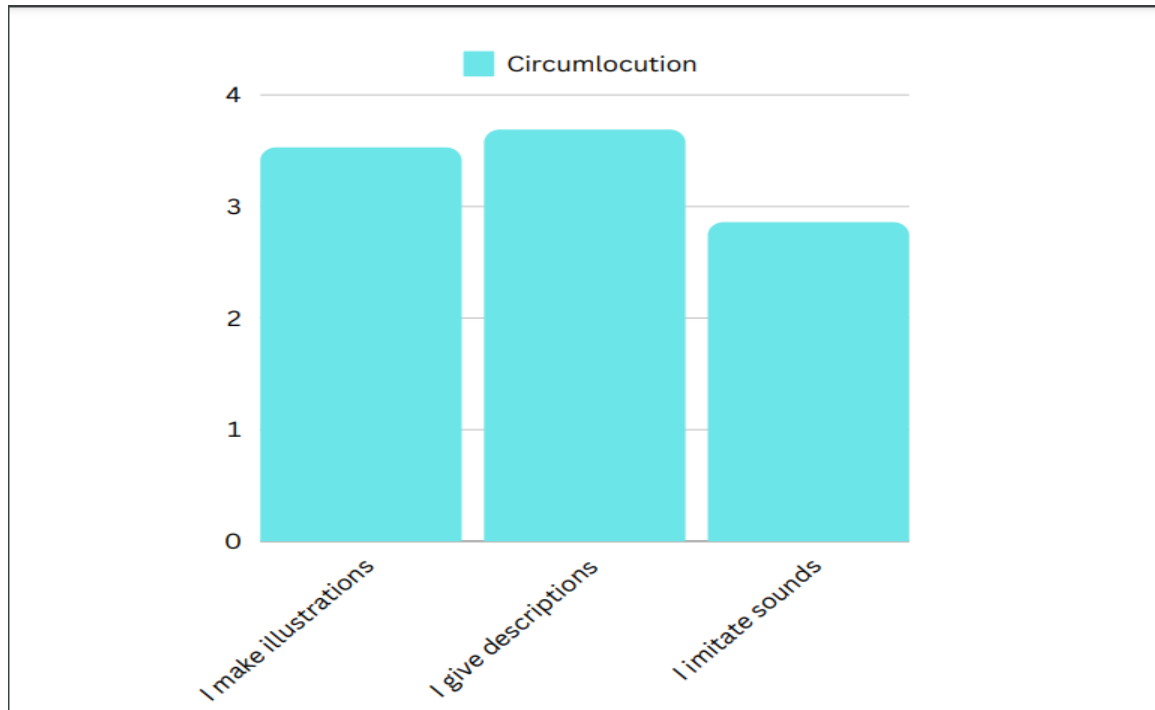


Chart 5: Participants' Use of Circumlocution

By and large, with the overall mean score of  $M=3.36$ , circumlocution represents an important part of participants' oral communication strategies as the participants ‘sometimes’ resort to it when faced with difficulty in the course of conveying their ideas.

### Speech Act Literal Translation

Chart 6 presents the participants' mean of employing literal translation as a strategy with which to handle the language difficulty which may result in communication breakdown in the course of disseminating a particular message. When it becomes necessary to have a recourse to literal translation, the participants alternate between the following three means: thinking in Yoruba before constructing English sentences, using Yoruba words but with imitation of English pronunciation, literally translating Yoruba idioms to English.

As for the first of the three components, the participants reported themselves as ‘sometimes’ (i.e.  $M=2.92$ ) processing a message in Yoruba, and later disseminate it literally in English to their audience (i.e. I think in Yoruba about what I want to say and then construct an English sentence based on that). Similarly, given the mean score  $M=2.63$ , the participants reported themselves as ‘sometimes’ pronouncing Yoruba words in English accent to replace the right English words they are forgetful of amidst communications (i.e. I use Yoruba word(s) with an English pronunciation when I have difficulty in communicating my ideas). They also

reported that they ‘sometimes’ (given the mean score  $M=2.63$ ) recourse to literal translation of Yoruba idioms to express their ideas in English (i.e. I translate Yoruba idioms and/or proverbs words for words into English in the course of my conversations).

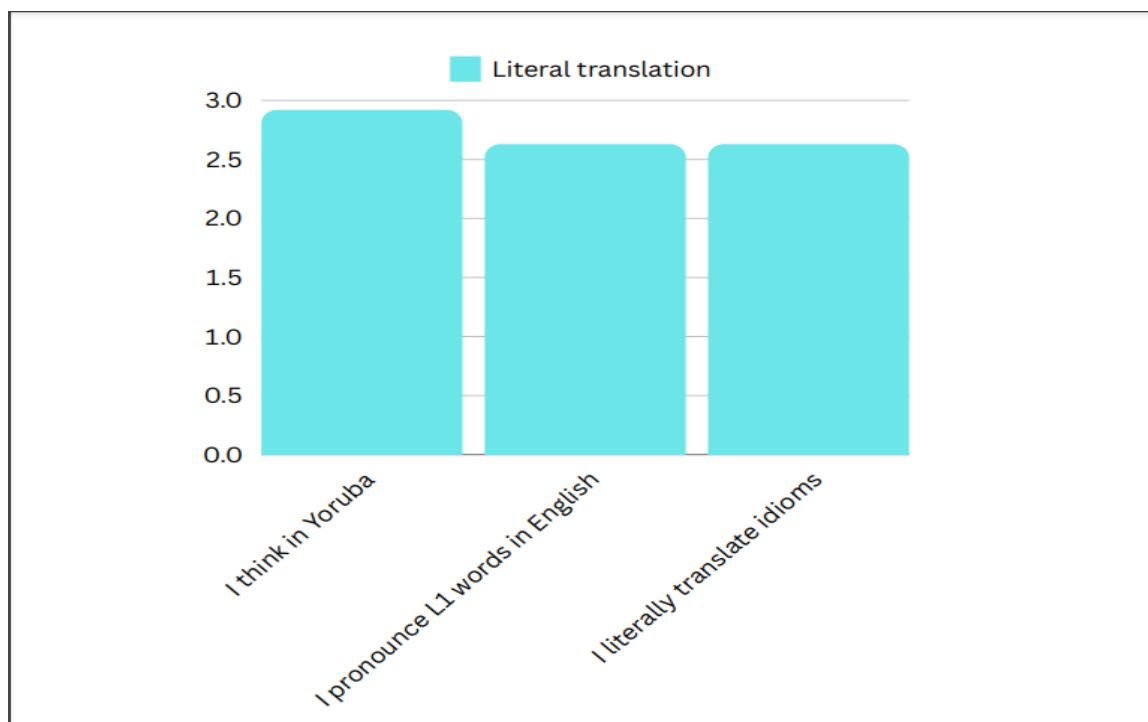


Chart 6: Participants' Use of Literal Translation

By and large, considering the overall means scores,  $M=2.72$ , which is recorded for the three components presented above, literal translation is said to be one of the key communication strategies used by the participants since they ‘sometimes’ resort to it in an effort to overcome difficulties encountered while attempting to communicate their ideas in English.

### Language Switch

Chart 7 presents the participants' use of language switch as one of the communication strategies employed to tackle part of the arising challenges they face amidst message conveyance in English. These participants reported five reasons for having a recourse to a switch from English to Yoruba amidst their communication and the frequency at which each of them is used. The first reason being lack of remembrance of the right English word to indicate the item in question (i.e. If I cannot remember the right English word to communicate a concept, I use an equivalent Yoruba word, and then continue my speech in English) was reported as used ‘sometimes’, given the mean score,  $M=2.78$ . Following that is the speaker's cognizance of the audience's lack of understanding of the intended message (i.e. When my audience cannot seem to understand my

message, I quickly switch to Yoruba to make them understand) which the participants reported that they ‘sometimes’ use, given the recorded mean score,  $M=2.97$ . Likewise, with the mean score,  $M=2.88$ , participants reported that they ‘sometimes’ resort to language switch when they feel that they are not confident enough to convey an idea in English (i.e. I switch to Yoruba amidst my speech when I feel that I am not confident enough to communicate an idea in English). Moreover, according to their report, the participants ‘sometimes’ use language switch (given the mean score,  $M=2.84$ ) when they find it necessary to make emphasis on an important point during a conversation (i.e. I switch to Yoruba when I feel the need to emphasize on a particular point I make in a dialogue (For example, using Yoruba ‘*discourse markers*’ such as ‘*Abi?*’ (i.e. isn’t it?), ‘*Ani*’ (i.e. I insist)). Lastly, given the mean score  $M=3.10$ , the participants reported themselves as ‘sometimes’ having a recourse to language switch when they find a need to strengthen a rapport with their audience (i.e. I switch to Yoruba when I feel the need to maintain rapport and interpersonal relationships with my interlocutor/audience).

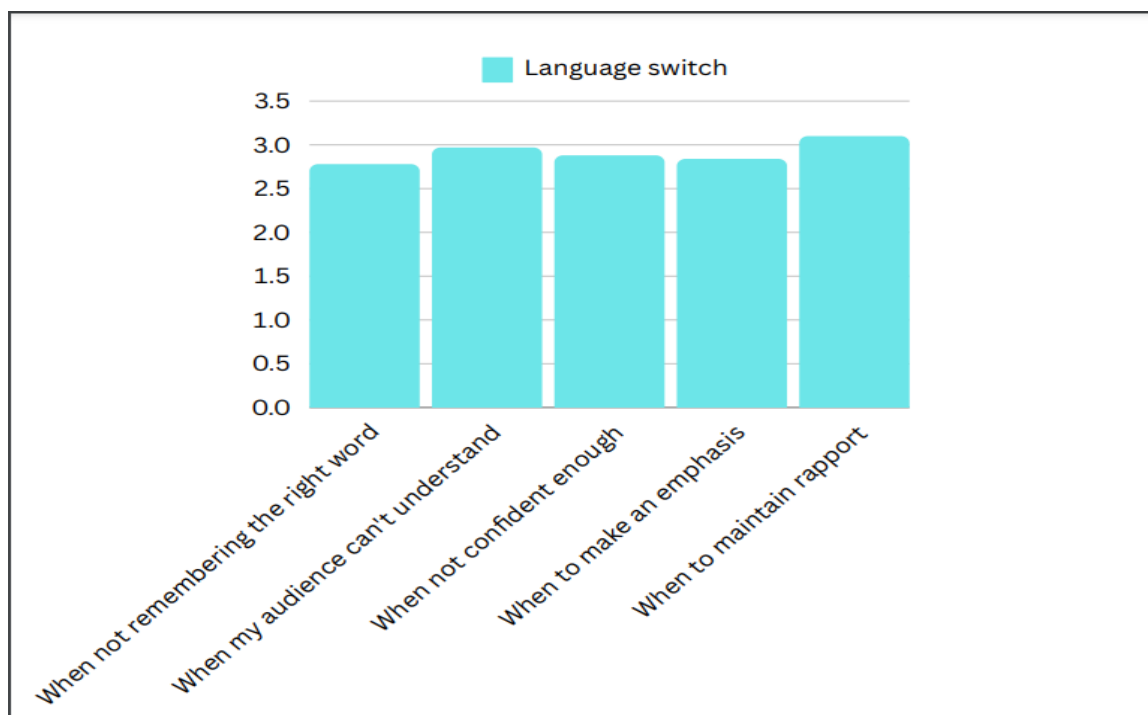


Chart 7: Participants' Use of Language Switch

Conclusively, given the overall mean scores of its whole components ( $M=2.92$ ), the participants are said to sometimes use language switch as one of the communication strategies with which they resolve the imminent communication breakdown.

## Appeal for Assistance

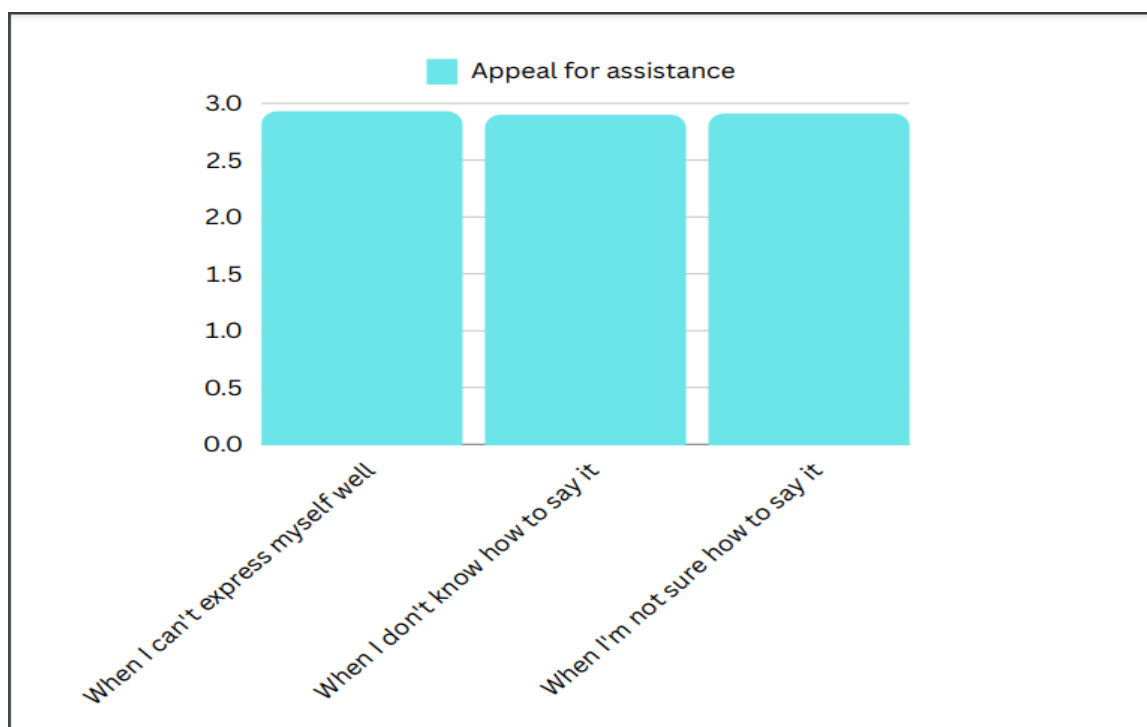


Chart 8: Participants' Use of Appeal for Assistance

Chart 8 highlights the participants' self-reported use of appeal for assistance as one of the communication strategies they employ in an effort to tackle the arising problems amid communication which result from insufficiency of lexical items with which to express their ideas. As shown in chart 9, participants reported their recourse to appeal for assistance amidst communication when they fall in any of the following three situations, namely when they are unable to express their ideas well, when they do not know how to say a word, and when they are unsure of the right way to say a word.

To be specific, given the mean score  $M=2.93$ , the participants reported themselves as 'sometimes' using appeal for assistance when they find it hard to communicate their ideas well (i.e. I ask a person I am speaking with for help when I cannot communicate my idea well). Likewise, given the mean score  $M=2.90$ , they reported themselves as 'sometimes' resorting to appeal for assistance when they do not know how to say a word in English (i.e. If I do not know how to say a word in English, I directly ask for help, for example, "How do you say .... in English?", "What do you call....in English?"). Also, with the mean score  $M=2.91$ , they self-rated their use of appeal for assistance when they are uncertain of the correct pronunciation of a particular English word (i.e. If I am not sure how to say a word in English, I indirectly ask for help, for example, "I am not sure how to say it in English").

Overall, considering the overall mean score  $M=2.9$  (i.e. indicating that it is sometimes used), appeal for assistance is regarded as an important oral communication strategy with which communication difficulties posed by insufficient lexical items to communicate one's ideas is properly dealt with.

## Mime

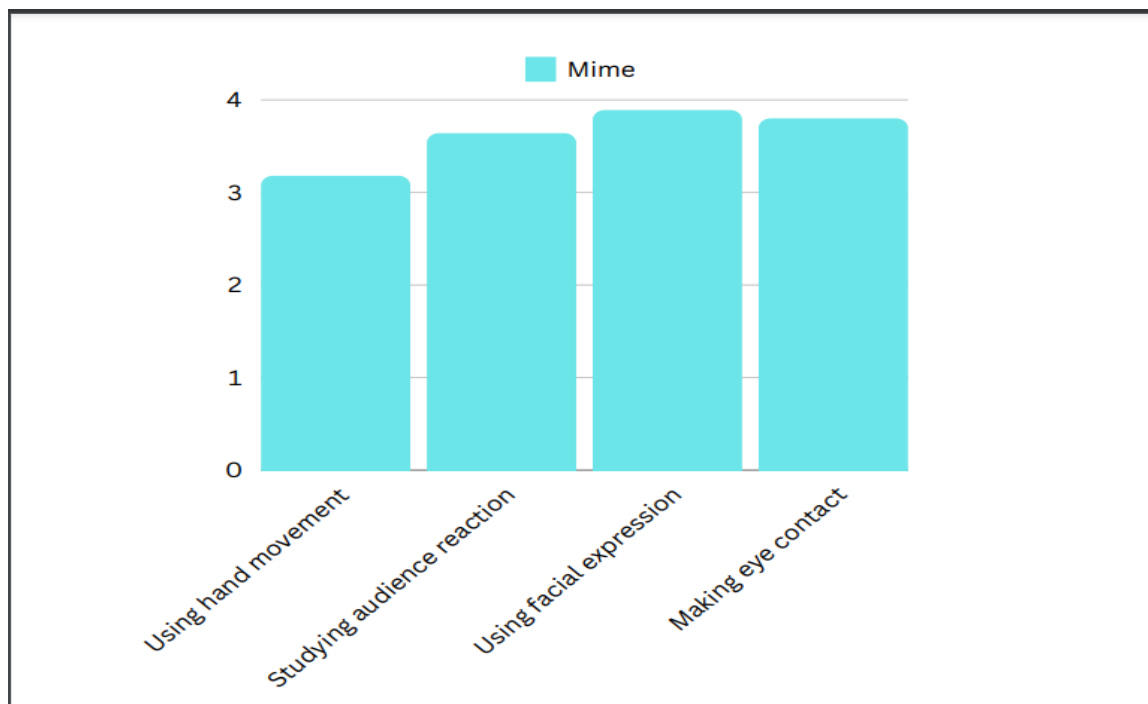


Chart 9: Participants' Use of Mime

Chart 9 above is a presentation of participants' use of mime as one of the strategies to circumvent communication breakdown which usually occurs due to insufficiency of lexical items with which to express themselves. The participants self-rated their recourse to this strategy through the following four means, namely using hand movement, studying audience reaction, using facial expression, and making eye contact. Specifically, with a frequency whose mean score is  $M=3.18$ , participants reported themselves as 'sometimes' using hand movements to demonstrate a particular meaning they intend to convey (i.e. When I communicate, I use hand movements if I have difficulty conveying an idea). Nevertheless, given the frequency with the mean score of  $M=3.64$ , they reported that they 'often' pay attention to the audience's reaction to their message (i.e. I pay attention to the listener's reaction to my speech to know if she/he understands me). Similarly, the participants show that they 'often' ( $M=3.89$ ) resort to the use of facial expression in an attempt to convey a meaning their level of proficiency cannot express (i.e. I use my facial expressions (smile, laugh, eyebrows) to communicate what I want to say). Lastly, the participants reported themselves as 'often'

(M=3.80) making use of eye contact to make their message well understood to their audience (i.e. I make eye contact with the listener to communicate what I want to say).

Conclusively, given its overall mean score, M=3.63, which signifies that they ‘sometimes’ resort to its use amidst communication challenges leading to an impending communication breakdown, the above report shows mime as a key communication strategy with which the participants handle the problem of insufficient lexical items they face while in an endeavor to convey a message.

### Stalling or Time Gaining Strategy

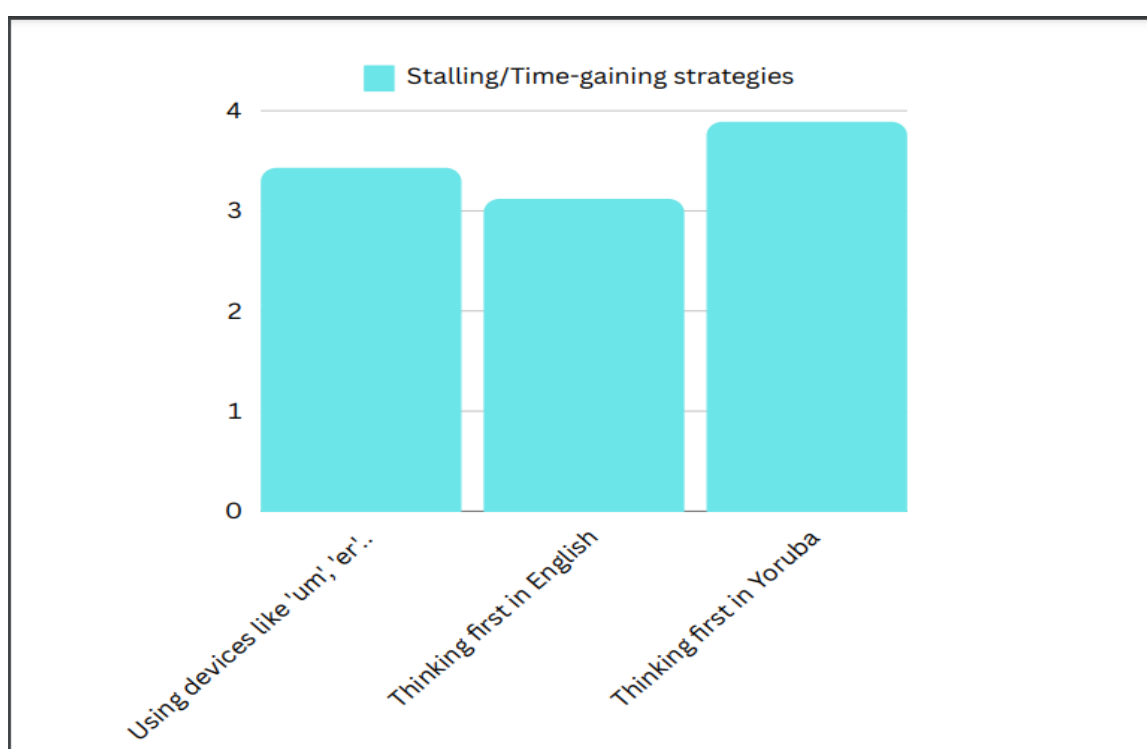


Chart 10: Participants' Use of Stalling and Time-Gaining Strategy

Chart 10 above presents the participants' use of stalling and time gaining strategy to prevent imminent communication breakdown in their daily English communicative interactions and productions. According to the chart, the participants highlighted three ways by which this strategy is employed, namely using devices like ‘em’, ‘er’, thinking first in English, and thinking first in Yoruba.

Given the mean score of M=3.43, the participants reported themselves as ‘often’ using stalling devices such as ‘em’, ‘er’ and so on (i.e. I try to use devices such as “em” to fill the pause in my speech while I am still thinking of the right word to use) to fill in the intermittent pauses (amidst message dissemination) which can lead to communication breakdown. However, with the mean score of M=3.12, the participants reported that they ‘sometimes’ expend the pause time amidst communication using English to think of the

next to say (i.e. I think first of a sentence I already know in English and then try to change it to fit the situation). Likewise, given the mean score of  $M=2.89$ , they also ‘sometimes’ spend their pause time using Yoruba to think of what next to say (i.e. I think first of what I want to say in my native language and then construct the English sentence).

In conclusion, considering the overall mean score of the three components reported above ( $M=3.15$ ), it is palpable that stalling or time gaining strategy is one of the communication strategies that the participants sometimes employ in an effort to ensure smooth processing of information while conveying a message.

### Negotiation for Meaning

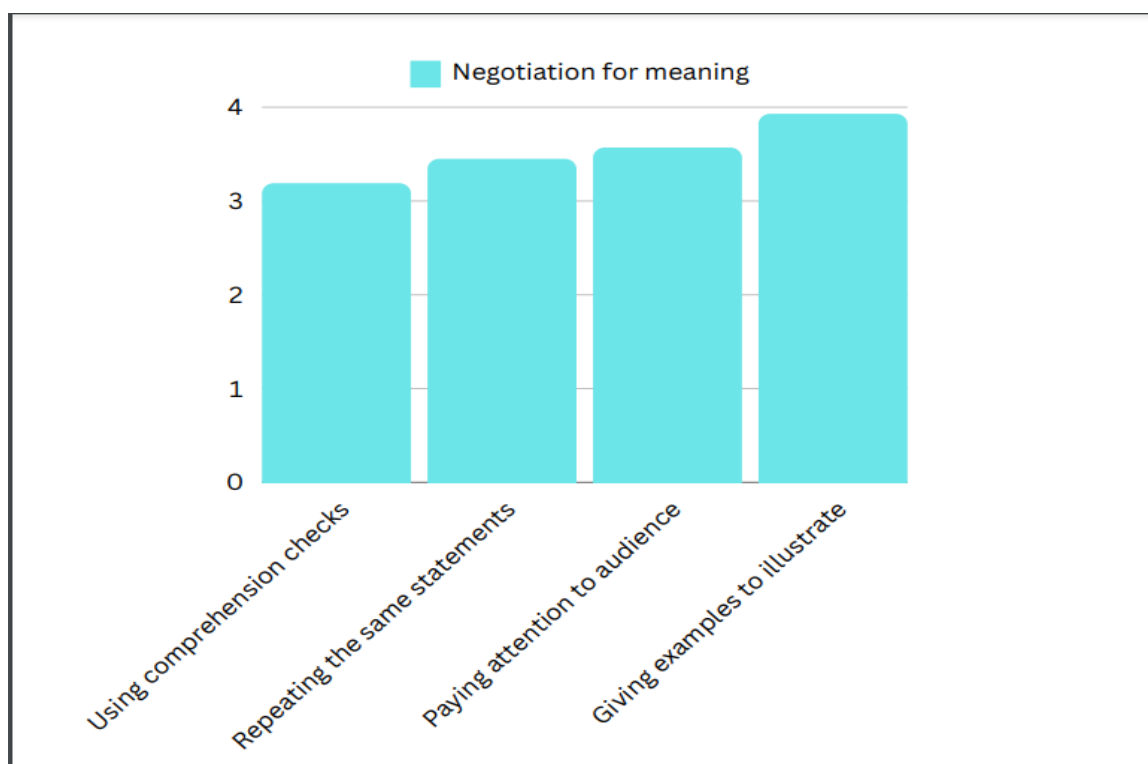


Chart 11: Participants' Use of Negotiation for Meaning

Chart 11 highlights the participants' employment of meaning negotiation strategies to improve the quality of their communication. Participants show the frequency at which they employ negotiation of meaning strategy via the above four means, namely using comprehension checks (like ‘You know’, ‘Alright?’, ‘Okay?’ and so forth), repeating the same statements till the listener understands, paying attention to the listener's reaction to the speech, and giving examples to illustrate the concept being addressed.

Given the mean score,  $M=3.19$ , participants reported themselves as ‘sometimes’ using comprehension checks to improve the quality of their communication. The rest three means of negotiation for meanings

(i.e. repeating the same statements, paying attention to audience, and giving examples to illustrate) with their mean scores being  $M=3.54$ ,  $M=3.57$ , and  $M=3.93$  respectively are, however, shown to be ‘often’ employed by participants amidst their communication interactions and productions.

Overall, negotiation of meanings represents an important part of the participants’ strategic competence as they generally ‘sometimes’ have a recourse to it in an effort to ensure that their intended message is effectively conveyed.

### Participants’ Oral Communicative Strategies

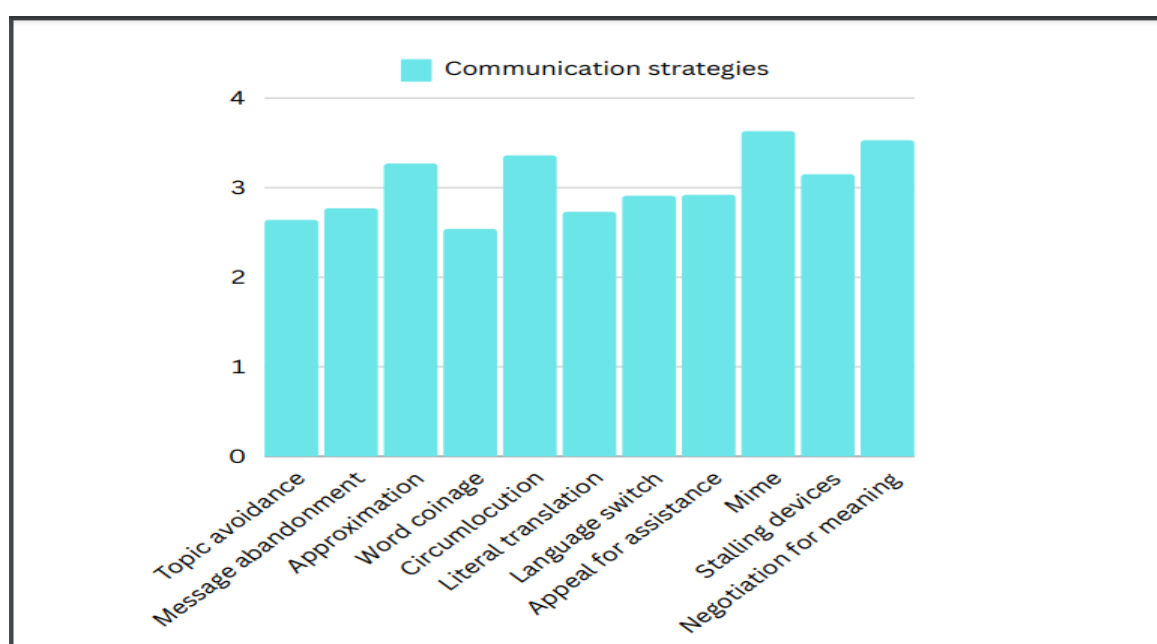


Chart 12: Participants’ Mean Use of Communicative Strategies

Chart 12 above presents a descriptive analysis of the participants’ self-reported communicative strategies via the administered questionnaire. Overall, all the 11 oral communicative strategies adopted by the study are reportedly used by the participants, although the frequency at which they use them varies from ‘rarely’ to ‘sometimes’ and to ‘often’, while none of them is ‘always’ used. To be specific, mime ( $M=3.63$ ) and negotiation for meanings ( $M=3.53$ ) which are reportedly ‘often’ used emerge as the most frequently used communicative strategies by the participants. Following this category are circumlocution ( $M=3.36$ ), approximation ( $M=3.27$ ), stalling and time gaining strategies ( $M=3.15$ ), appeal for assistance ( $M=2.92$ ), language switch ( $M=2.91$ ), message abandonment ( $M=2.77$ ), literal translation ( $M=2.73$ ) and topic avoidance ( $M=2.64$ ) which the participants reported they ‘sometimes’ use. However, word coinage ( $M=2.54$ ) which represents the least frequently used communicative strategy is reported as ‘rarely’ used by the participants.

As can be rightly conceptualized from the previous paragraphs, the participants reported themselves as sometimes using most of the above communication strategies in handling the impending communication breakdowns amidst speech delivery and interactions. To begin with, the fact that the participants use a range of communication strategies is held as an index that South-Western Nigerian university engineering students are a population of ESL learners who are capable of expressing their ideas eloquently with the aid of different communicative strategies used to tackle the imminent communication breakdowns in the course of conversations and message disseminations. This agrees with a number of previous studies such as Abdullateef Solihu et al. (2023), Namaziadost and Imani (2020), and Suwartono and Kerti (2020) who found that ESL/EFL spoken discourse contains a variety of communicative strategies with which the problems that arise amidst communication attempts are addressed.

What is more, the conspicuous precedence given to mime, negotiation for meaning, approximation, circumlocution and stalling devices among other strategies is symptomatic of their preference for achievement strategies over reduction strategies in handling the arising problems amidst communication endeavors. By implication, these participants tend to prioritize fluency over accuracy as they appear courageous enough to take risks in an effort to articulate themselves. This finding corresponds with that of Lewis (2011) when he found that L2 users who give preference to fluency over accuracy in communication usually prefer to take risks in their attempts to convey messages, thereby tending to use more of achievement strategies, while their counterparts, who tend to dodge challenges in an effort to communicate a meaning, often use reduction strategies.

This obvious positive attitude towards communication strategies needs to be reinforced in students as it is envisaged to help them pave ways out of communication problems arising from linguistic resource deficit, thereby improving their communicative competence.

## **Conclusion**

The participants' acknowledgment and self-reported frequency of using oral communication strategies strongly suggests that L2 users proactively, whether consciously or unconsciously, take steps to prevent communication breakdowns caused by limited language resources. While ongoing and rigorous training in communicative language use remains crucial for mastery, the value of reinforcing these strategies should not be overlooked. These strategies offer essential tools for overcoming communicative challenges, especially as learners work towards proficiency.

Although more work is needed to ensure that university English courses are tailored to the current and future communication needs of Nigerian engineering students, this study highlights for university language instructors the importance of teaching engineering students a wider array of oral communication strategies and how to use them effectively.

## Author contributions

All authors contributed immensely to this article. Author 1 designed the research, collected and analysed the data, and wrote the draft. Authors 2 and 3 supervised the work by reviewing the manuscript and approving the final version of the paper.

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## Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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