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Exploring ELT Instructors' Readiness for AI Integration: A Qualitative Study of Student Perceptions in Malaysian Higher Education

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Abstract

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into English Language Teaching (ELT) holds significant transformative potential, particularly through tools such as ChatGPT, which facilitate personalised instruction and interactive learning experiences. However, the effectiveness of such integration is contingent upon instructors' readiness to adopt and apply these technologies in pedagogically sound ways. This study explores the perceptions of Malaysian higher education students regarding the preparedness of their ELT instructors for AI integration. Employing a qualitative research design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 47 purposively selected undergraduate students from a Malaysian higher education institution. Thematic analysis identified four salient themes, which include disparities in instructor readiness, inconsistent utilisation of AI tools, technical and infrastructural limitations, and student apprehensions concerning overreliance and ethical usage. The findings highlight the pressing need for comprehensive professional development initiatives, institutional backing, and robust pedagogical frameworks to enable effective AI integration. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on AI in education by foregrounding student perspectives and offering practical recommendations to enhance ELT instructors' digital competence and instructional innovation.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence (AI), ChatGPT, ELT, Higher Education, Instructor Readiness, Professional Development*

Introduction

Background of The Study

The recent rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has paved the way for a growing interest in comprehending AI's applications, usage, and challenges, including issues and concerns across every aspect of human life. Specifically, ChatGPT, an application which OpenAI has progressively developed, was

introduced to the world in November 2020 and is designed to mimic human intelligence (Sindermann et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021), conversations, and produce text responses according to user prompts. AI significantly impacts various aspects of life, influencing individuals through applications on smart devices and in sectors like manufacturing, transportation, healthcare, and more. As AI technology continues to advance, its full potential remains unknown (Sharadgah & Sa'di, 2022). According to Zhang and Chen (2021, p. 6), artificial intelligence is referred to as *"machines that can think and act like humans" and can do what originally only humans could do*. An exponential increment in the number of research studies exploring the application of AI across a myriad of different fields indicates that AI itself has a gigantic potential and roles in shifting the paradigms of industries, transforming traditional practices, and driving innovation in various domains, including education, healthcare, business, and technology. AI's capability to surpass certain computationally demanding, intellectual, and even creative limitations of humans unlocks new possibilities across various fields, including education, marketing, healthcare, finance, and manufacturing, ultimately enhancing productivity and performance (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

OpenAI, a pioneering organisation in artificial intelligence research, was founded in December 2015 by prominent figures such as Elon Musk, Sam Altman, Greg Brockman, Ilya Sutskever, Wojciech Zaremba, and John Schulman with the mission of ensuring AI benefits all of humanity. One of its groundbreaking creations, ChatGPT, was launched in November 2022 and rapidly gained global traction, reaching one million users within five days (Firat, 2023). The advancement of AI systems has reached a stage where machine intelligence can now efficiently handle tasks such as operating autonomous vehicles, managing chatbots, planning and scheduling, gaming, translation, medical diagnosis, and combating spam (Dwivedi et al., 2021). This is apparent whereby ChatGPT's emergence and usage has made significant impacts across various domains, including business and marketing (George & George, 2023; Raj et al., 2023), healthcare (Javaid et al., 2023; Sallam, 2023), technology and software development (Hörnemalm, 2023; Kalla et al., 2023), creative industries (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2024; Rane, 2023a), finance (Khan & Umer, 2024; Rane, 2023b) and most importantly, education (Dempere et al., 2023; Lo, 2023; Montenegro-Rueda et al., 2023) by enhancing productivity, creativity, and accessibility. Therefore, the rapid development and cross-sector integration of AI technologies such as ChatGPT demonstrate their transformative potential, prompting a critical personal reflection on the profound implications these tools hold for enhancing learning, innovation, and human productivity.

In the education field, several recent research have attempted to uncover the benefits, potential, issues and concerns of integrating AI in education system's teaching and learning processes, focusing on how AI can enhance personalisation, streamline administrative tasks, foster student engagement, and address challenges such as ethical considerations, data privacy, and teacher adaptability. ChatGPT and related generative AI tools offer significant benefits in advancing teaching and learning that include personalised

tutoring (Ayeni et al., 2024), automated essay grading (AES) (Lee et al., 2023), language translation (Muñoz-Basols et al., 2023), interactive learning experiences (Chen et al., 2020; Zhai et al., 2021), and adaptive learning systems (Gligorea et al., 2023; Kabudi et al., 2021). These tools enable tailored instruction, efficient grading, broader accessibility, engaging interactions, and customised learning paths, enhancing educational outcomes and supporting teachers in delivering compelling learning experiences (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023). Nonetheless, research has identified several challenges and concerns regarding integrating AI in education. Scholars have identified several challenges and problems, including ethical considerations (Khreisat et al., 2024; Reiss, 2021), data privacy (Amo Filvá et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2023), and teacher adaptability (Kim, 2024; Luckin & Holmes, 2016). However, this does not hinder the further use of AI in education, as research has also found that AI brings numerous advantages to both learners and instructors inside and outside of the classroom setting.

Building on these advantages, the integration of AI in education continues to evolve, offering innovative solutions that extend learning opportunities beyond traditional classroom boundaries while empowering educators to focus on more meaningful aspects of teaching. These advantages include personalised learning(Alam, 2023; Tapalova & Zhiyenbayeva, 2022), real-time feedback (Holstein et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2018), tailored interactive teaching and learning activities(Ayeni et al., 2024; Nazaretsky et al., 2022), facilitation of speaking and discussion practice (Fathi et al., 2024; Zou et al., 2023), automation of assessments (Mizumoto & Eguchi, 2023; Owan et al., 2023), expanded information accessibility (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023; Zaman, 2023), and adaptive learning capabilities (Gligorea et al., 2023; Kabudi et al., 2021). These benefits are for learners and course instructors as AI technologies advance; their integration in education holds immense potential to transform teaching and learning processes, creating more efficient, inclusive, and engaging educational experiences for both learners and instructors. This can be seen in the context of English Language Teaching and Learning (ELT) as well where it has been found that the incorporation of AI into English Language Teaching (ELT) has the potential to transform language learning and instructional methods (Mabuan, 2024). In ELT, scholars identified prominent benefits and potentials of AI in English language instruction, which include personalised learning (Crompton et al., 2024; Edmett et al., 2023) , real-time corrective feedback (Crompton et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023; Mohammadkarimi, 2024), enhanced speaking and pronunciation practice (Fathi et al., 2024; Kuddus, 2022), automation of assessments(Amin, 2023; Mushthoza et al., 2023), language translation and support (Rukiati et al., 2023), adaptive learning systems (Anis, 2023; Crompton et al., 2024; Lawrance et al., 2024), interactive learning tools(Fathi et al., 2024; Mushthoza et al., 2023; Tulasi & Rao, 2023), improved writing skills (Huang et al., 2023; Song & Song, 2023), and gamified language learning(Anis, 2023; Bhutoria, 2022; Moybeka et al., 2023). As such, the continued integration of AI into ELT not only enriches the teaching and

learning experience but also signifies a change in thinking toward more dynamic, data-informed, and learner-centred language education.

Nonetheless, in providing a check-and-balance view on this, it is best to address that scholars have identified several challenges and concerns surrounding AI integration in education and ELT, specifically. In English Language Teaching (ELT), AI integration has been determined to cause disruptions, changing the roles of ELT instructors. AI integration and application have caused English educators challenges in terms of their pedagogical methods in teaching as well as student-support services (Barakina et al., 2021; Hutson et al., 2022; Owoc et al., 2019), signalling the end of teachers' roles in the academic profession (Weissman, 2023). This has created the risks of AI in diminishing the involvement of human teachers in the educational process (Rukiati et al., 2023), such as evaluating assignments and offering feedback to the students (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Huang et al., 2023). Mabuan (2024), in their study, investigated English language teachers' perceptions concerning the integration of ChatGPT in language learning. The expanding research on AI integration in education suggests its transformative potential in enhancing learning and teaching, while also emphasising the necessity of addressing ethical, privacy, and implementation challenges to ensure its responsible and effective use in educational contexts.

In conclusion, while AI integration in education offers several advantages, its limitations, such as diminishing the role of teachers, challenges in pedagogical approaches, threats to academic integrity, bias in decision-making, and exacerbating educational inequality, must be carefully addressed to ensure its responsible and equitable application in English Language Teaching and broader educational contexts. While previous studies highlight the benefits and challenges of AI in English Language Teaching (ELT), there is limited research on the specific impact of tools like ChatGPT on teacher roles, student engagement, and academic integrity, especially in underrepresented and resource-limited contexts, specifically in the Malaysian Higher Education Institutions setting.

AI integration in English Language Teaching (ELT) offers significant potential to transform teaching roles and improve learning outcomes. While existing studies have addressed aspects of AI adoption, there remains a limited in-depth exploration of ELT instructors' needs and readiness, particularly concerning teaching materials, pedagogical approaches, and implementation procedures (Sharadgah & Sa'di, 2022). Bekou et al. (2024) highlighted the absence of guidelines for educators to incorporate AI into classrooms, leaving them without clear strategies for successful adoption. This gap underscores the need for exploration and research to comprehensively describe AI-based teaching methods and materials to address ELT instructors' pedagogical, content, and ethical needs. This study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice by focusing on these requirements, offering targeted insights to enhance ELT instructors' readiness in optimising student learning outcomes. Structured yet flexible AI implementation in ELT will ensure its full potential benefits for educators and learners (Bekou et al., 2024). Thus, this study examines ELT

students' perceptions of readiness for ChatGPT integration, focusing on its effects on instructional methods and student outcomes related to pedagogy, academic integrity, and equity.

Research Question

To investigate the specific areas for AI integration in ELT and to bridge the identified gaps, this study is driven by the following research question;

1. How do HEI students perceive their ELT instructors' readiness for AI integration in English language teaching?

Literature Review

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has experienced rapid and significant advancements over the past few decades, driving major changes across various fields (Holmes & Tuomi, 2022), including English Language Teaching (ELT) on a global scale, where notable progress has been achieved (Chan, 2021; Moorhouse & Yan, 2023; Rintaningrum, 2023). In response to the rapidly evolving market demands, many institutions have ramped up efforts to integrate AI across diverse disciplines (Hutson et al., 2022). However, this does not equate to universal acceptance (Yu, 2020), as concerns persist, with predictions suggesting that 400 to 800 million jobs could be displaced by 2030 due to AI and automation, sparking apprehension with each technological advancement (Bughin et al., 2017; Smithies & Smithies, 2017). Despite these concerns, research into the potential of AI and Natural Language Processing (NLP) for enhancing language learning and improving student outcomes continues to expand rapidly, reflecting growing interest in the field (Alhalangy & AbdAlgane, 2023; Alqahtani et al., 2023; Holmes & Tuomi, 2022; Huang et al., 2023). From another perspective, integrating AI in education does not signify the decline of traditional learning but instead marks a transformative era, enabling educators to achieve meaningful pedagogical improvements (Heaven, 2023).

Merits of AI In English Language Teaching and Learning

Integrating AI into English language learning provides substantial benefits for teachers and students by fostering more flexible, personalised, and inclusive learning environments. AI tools, such as ChatGPT, facilitate timely responses to students' progress, enhancing engagement and learning effectiveness (Schiff, 2022; Taneri, 2020). Intelligent tutoring systems further personalise education by adapting instruction to individual learning styles and paces, while fostering socio-emotional engagement through AI-driven agents that simulate social interactions to sustain motivation. In addition to improving student experiences, AI assists teachers by automating administrative tasks and analysing data, enabling them to concentrate on more complex roles, such as mentoring and guidance.

AI also expands access to high-quality educational resources, particularly in underserved areas, by providing scalable solutions and real-time feedback for continuous improvement. Kostka and Toncelli (2023) highlighted that ELT teachers value ChatGPT for its ability to enhance vocabulary acquisition, writing skills, and real-time conversation practice. Similarly, other research demonstrates that AI tools enable personalised feedback and self-paced learning, making education more accessible. ChatGPT also supports grammar correction, reading comprehension, and cultural understanding, which allows teachers to prioritise critical instructional tasks. Mabuan (2024) concurred, noting that ChatGPT is a valuable tool for expanding vocabulary, improving fluency, and supporting conversational practice. AI-powered tools also democratise education by offering cost-effective, personalised learning solutions that reach a broader, more diverse audience than traditional methods (Rukiati et al., 2023). These platforms provide affordable alternatives to conventional courses, increasing access to quality learning experiences. For teachers, AI streamlines grading and provides real-time feedback, reducing their administrative workload and allowing them to focus on lesson planning and student interaction.

Moreover, AI enhances accessibility with 24/7 availability of learning materials, enabling students to learn at their own pace, regardless of location or schedule. By adapting lessons to student progress, AI keeps learners motivated and engaged, while analytics identify areas of difficulty, providing targeted support to enhance learning outcomes. AI's growing role in language learning highlights its potential to deliver individualised education, improve accessibility, and reduce teacher workload, empowering educators to focus on higher-level instructional tasks. These advancements are transforming how English language instruction is delivered, offering more efficient, equitable, and impactful learning experiences.

However, to maximise the benefits provided by AI in ELT, users need to address its limitations to prevent potential challenges, such as over-reliance on AI-generated content and biases in language models. While AI enhances language learning through automation and personalisation, it lacks the human touch necessary for nuanced instruction, cultural sensitivity, and the development of critical thinking. Teachers must integrate AI thoughtfully, using it as a complementary tool rather than replacing pedagogical expertise. Training and upskilling educators in AI literacy are crucial to ensuring its responsible and effective use in ELT. By addressing these limitations, AI can be harnessed to create a balanced, learner-centred approach that maximises its strengths while mitigating its risks, leading to a more inclusive and impactful English language learning experience.

ELT Instructors' Readiness Towards the Implementation of ChatGPT in ELT

The implementation of ChatGPT in ELT has garnered vast attention from the scholarly body in evaluating both ELT instructors' and learners' readiness to integrate AI-powered tools into their pedagogical practices, thereby reshaping traditional approaches to language education and opening new avenues for interactive,

learner-centred instruction. As addressed earlier, studies conducted show that ELT educators have demonstrated favourable perceptions of ChatGPT, recognising its capacity to enhance lesson planning, foster dynamic language activities, and provide individualised feedback (Can & Mangır, 2024; Ulla et al., 2023; Urazbayeva et al., 2024). In the context of ELT, ChatGPT is perceived as a beneficial instrument in developing innovative teaching material, content, collaborative ELT teaching and learning strategies, and implementing practical assessments (Kusuma et al., 2024). ChatGPT's capacity to emulate authentic conversational interactions is widely acknowledged for enhancing language fluency and comprehension (Al-Khresheh, 2024). Empirical research indicates that structured experimental applications of ChatGPT can markedly enhance educators' competence in incorporating this technology into their pedagogical practices (Urazbayeva et al., 2024). ELT instructors who participated in workshops and training sessions reported a marked enhancement in their confidence and proficiency in employing ChatGPT to develop instructional materials (Can & Mangır, 2024).

Despite widespread enthusiasm, several challenges have emerged, including the risk of excessive reliance on AI, academic misconduct, and the potential deterioration of students' skills (Al-Khresheh, 2024; Ulla et al., 2023). Multiple studies have emphasised concerns regarding the reliability and credibility of ChatGPT's outputs, underscoring the necessity for critical evaluation to detect potential inaccuracies (Mena Octavio et al., 2024; Ulla et al., 2023). As importantly addressed, both the technical and practical dimensions of implementation, including the necessity for extensive training and continuous support, are essential for successful integration (Can & Mangır, 2024). To make full use of AI in ELT, effective utilization of ChatGPT requires specialised AI skills, such as the ability to construct well-crafted prompts and to critically assess the content generated by the system (Mena Octavio et al., 2024) whereby ongoing professional development initiatives and workshops are vital for equipping ELT instructors with the essential skills to effectively utilise ChatGPT in ELT settings (Can & Mangır, 2024; Urazbayeva et al., 2024).

In conclusion, the consistent emergence of research that focuses on teacher readiness and perspectives regarding the integration of ChatGPT in language education reflects a sustained interest in understanding and enhancing ELT instructors' readiness for AI integration in ELT. This underscores the critical importance of equipping instructors with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively utilise AI tools like ChatGPT, thereby ensuring that technological innovations are optimally leveraged to enrich language teaching and learning practices.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore students' perceptions of their English Language Teaching (ELT) instructors' readiness for integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into classroom instruction. This approach was selected to gain in-depth insights into students' lived experiences, evaluations, and interpretations (Galletta & Cross, 2013) of their instructors' preparedness, training, and implementation practices related to AI tools, such as ChatGPT. The semi-structured format allowed for consistency in questioning while offering flexibility to probe relevant issues as they emerged during the interviews (McIntosh & Morse, 2015).

Participants

The study involved 47 undergraduate students from a higher education institution (HEI) in Perak, Malaysia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals (Campbell et al., 2020) who had substantial classroom exposure to ELT settings where AI was mentioned, discussed, or applied. This targeted sampling approach enabled the collection of rich, detailed perspectives from students who were meaningfully positioned to evaluate their instructors' AI-related competencies. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identities in all reporting. Additionally, researchers shared the transcribed data with participants for verification, and they retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence.

Data Collection

Data were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews lasting 30 to 45 minutes each. The interview protocol included open-ended questions that encouraged students to describe their observations of instructors' AI integration efforts, their experiences with AI-related teaching activities, and their views on the preparedness and confidence levels of ELT instructors in using AI tools. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and conducted in a private setting to ensure comfort and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the content. Transcripts were then imported into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. Segments of text representing meaningful ideas were coded and grouped into broader thematic categories.

Codes were refined through iterative analysis, and thematic connections were visualised using the software's network mapping tools. Analytical memos were used throughout to document reflections and emerging insights.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, all participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained through a signed consent form, which assured participants of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the use of pseudonyms (Participant) to protect their identities in all reports and publications. To ensure transparency and respect for participants' autonomy, interviewees were also given access to their transcribed responses for verification. All data were securely stored and handled in compliance with ethical research standards to maintain privacy and safeguard participant information.

Results and Findings

In this study, only sufficiently detailed and information-rich responses were included in the thematic analysis. This approach aligns with the principles of qualitative research, where the goal is to gain depth of understanding rather than generalisability (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Information-rich responses offer comprehensive, reflective, and contextually grounded insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and reasoning. By focusing on such responses, the analysis generated more nuanced themes that accurately reflect the complexity of students' views on AI integration in ELT classrooms. This purposive selection of rich data also demonstrates the logic of maximum meaning yield (Patton, 2014), prioritising depth and quality over quantity when interpreting participant narratives. While this may limit the representativeness of the data across the full sample, it ensures that the themes generated are grounded in substantive, meaningful student reflections rather than superficial or incomplete statements. This approach is particularly suitable for studies aiming to explore emerging phenomena such as AI adoption in education, where variability in awareness and engagement levels among participants may lead to uneven response quality.

Discussion

This section presents the findings from the thematic analysis of students' perceptions regarding ELT instructors' readiness to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) in English Language Teaching (ELT) within Malaysian higher education institutions. The discussion is structured around three key elements identified by the participants: (1) perceptions of ELT instructors' readiness in integrating AI, (2) the impact of AI use on students' learning experience, and (3) students' perceptions of changing classroom dynamics. These

elements, supported by thematic categories such as the need for training, tool usage consistency, technical barriers, and shifts in student-teacher interaction, offer a nuanced understanding of the current state of instructor preparedness. Drawing on direct student accounts, the discussion highlights the pedagogical opportunities and implementation challenges of AI use in ELT. It also reflects the broader implications for institutional policy, professional development, and the need for targeted capacity-building initiatives to ensure instructors are equipped to navigate and adopt AI tools meaningfully in the classroom.

Perceptions of Students Regarding ELT Instructors' Readiness in Integrating AI in the ELT Classroom

The analysis of students' perceptions revealed four key themes relating to their evaluation of ELT instructors' readiness to integrate artificial intelligence (AI) into the classroom environment. These themes reflect students' awareness of their instructors' capabilities, support mechanisms, and the barriers surrounding AI implementation in English language teaching.

Need for Training and Readiness

Many participants highlighted an apparent disparity in instructors' preparedness for AI integration, with varied experiences indicating a lack of uniformity across classrooms. Some students described their lecturers as being in the early stages of AI adoption. For instance, Participant 17 stated that most of their ELT lecturers are still in the early stages of integrating AI tools like ChatGPT into their teaching practices and that "not all of them are confident in using AI, and this could lead to hesitation in trying new methods." Similarly, Participant 24 observed that while some lecturers have begun experimenting with AI, "there are also lecturers who are still hesitant… lecturers may need proper training and guidelines on how to incorporate AI tools in a balanced and ethical manner.". This need for professional development was echoed by Participant 27, who expressed that "most of my lecturers strictly avoid using AI… it depends if the lecturer does know what they are doing." Meanwhile, Participant 31 noted that "some lecturers are enthusiastic… Those who've attended workshops or training sessions seem more confident… Not all lecturers are on the same page.." Other participants that echo this perception towards ELT instructors' Need for Training and Readiness are Participant 2, Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 8, Participant 14, Participant 18, Participant 19, Participant 28, Participant 29, Participant 32, Participant 33, Participant 34, Participant 36, Participant 38, Participant 39, Participant 40, Participant 44, Participant 45, and Participant 47. These responses underscore the pressing need for structured and equitable training opportunities to support ELT instructors' digital readiness.

Information Delivery and Usage

A second theme centred around how instructors currently use AI tools, particularly in delivering lessons and facilitating assignments. Participant 31 remarked that lecturers "often use AI tools like Turnitin to evaluate assignments… Also recommended Grammarly or Quill Bot… These tools help improve writing and ensure clarity." Others pointed to a more exploratory usage. Participant 17 noted that "some lecturers encourage us to explore AI for brainstorming… I would appreciate more structured guidance for writing and vocabulary." For Participant 24, AI tools like ChatGPT were presented as helpful resources: "In some of my classes, lecturers have encouraged students to use AI tools like ChatGPT to generate ideas… This has helped students improve their writing skills." On the other hand, some voiced concerns regarding the reliability of AI-generated content. Participant 27 stated, “Let’s say if the lecturer is researching using ChatGPT… the information given might not be valid… So, the lecturer might have to research more deeply..” Other participants which share this opinion regarding ELT instructors' use of AI tools in delivering lessons and facilitating assignments are Participant 2, Participant 4, Participant 6, Participant 10, Participant 11, Participant 12, Participant 13, Participant 14, Participant 15, Participant 18, Participant 28, Participant 29, Participant 30, Participant 33, Participant 34, Participant 36, Participant 40, Participant 41, Participant 44, Participant 45, and Participant 46. These insights reflect an emerging pattern in which AI is used in varying degrees and with inconsistent pedagogical direction.

Technical Barriers and Limitations

Students also reported limitations that hinder the seamless integration of AI in the ELT context. Participant 31 pointed out issues of access and affordability, noting that "some lecturers still worry about technical glitches… Not all students can afford full-feature subscriptions… AI bias and compatibility issues may arise.” Confidence in handling such challenges also appeared to be a concern. Participant 17 shared that "not all of them are confident using AI… They could use AI effectively with training and support.” In line with this, Participant 24 commented that "some lecturers may struggle due to limited familiarity… Training and support would help them manage AI tools more effectively.”

Additionally, Participant 27 acknowledged the simplicity and complexity of technical issues, stating that "sometimes AI provides misinformation… Some issues are easy; others are impossible to fix..” In addition to these accounts, several other participants drew attention to similar technical and infrastructural challenges impeding the effective integration of AI in ELT settings. These include Participant 4, Participant 9, Participant 10, Participant 11, Participant 12, Participant 23, Participant 26, Participant 29, Participant 33, Participant 38, Participant 39, Participant 40, Participant 41, and Participant 44, who highlighted concerns such as limited access, software reliability, and the lack of adequate technological support. These responses

reveal the infrastructural and practical challenges that must be addressed to optimise AI implementation in ELT classrooms.

Student-Centric Support

Lastly, students observed that AI tools, when appropriately used, can enhance student learning, though not without reservations. Participant 31 explained, "Turnitin discourages plagiarism and encourages students to develop writing and critical thinking… Grammarly helps with clarity… However, overreliance on AI may hinder spontaneous problem-solving." Echoing the desire for guided usage, Participant 17 expressed, "I'd like guidance on how to use AI tools for improving my writing and vocabulary… I believe with training, AI tools can become valuable." Similarly, Participant 24 acknowledged the benefits of tools like ChatGPT, noting, "Students use ChatGPT to check grammar and generate writing ideas… This has helped improve skills… But concerns about academic integrity persist." Finally, Participant 27 viewed the minimal use of AI as beneficial to self-development: "Lecturers avoid AI, so students use their potential… This has helped classmates understand their work better without AI.." Beyond these examples, numerous other participants expressed similar views on the value of AI as a supplementary learning aid that enhances academic writing, critical thinking, and learner autonomy when used with appropriate guidance. These include Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 7, Participant 8, Participant 10, Participant 11, Participant 12, Participant 13, Participant 14, Participant 15, Participant 16, Participant 18, Participant 19, Participant 20, Participant 21, Participant 25, Participant 26, Participant 28, Participant 29, Participant 30, Participant 32, Participant 33, Participant 34, Participant 35, Participant 36, Participant 38, Participant 39, Participant 40, Participant 44, Participant 45 and Participant 47. These findings suggest that students value AI as a supplemental tool but also recognise the importance of balancing its use with critical engagement and ethical practice.

Impact of the Use of AI by ELT Instructors on Students' Learning Experience

The second thematic element focuses on how students perceive the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, particularly those introduced by their instructors, on their learning experience in English language classrooms. Responses across the dataset highlighted both benefits and concerns, ranging from enhanced efficiency and engagement to apprehensions about overreliance and diminished critical thinking.

Enhanced Learning Efficiency

Many students acknowledged that AI tools had improved the speed and clarity of their learning processes. Participant 17 commented, "Tools like ChatGPT can help students practice writing, expand their vocabulary, and even receive instant feedback… AI tools like ChatGPT can provide instant suggestions and corrections, which is convenient and time-saving." This sentiment was echoed by Participant 23, who noted, "AI helps

enhance my writing by identifying grammatical mistakes and suggesting better ways to construct sentences… especially when I'm stuck and need quick feedback." Similarly, Participant 33 praised the refinement AI tools brought to writing: "AI helps enhance my writing… makes my writing more refined and well-structured." Participant 31's value lay in summarisation and quick access to ideas. As addressed, "ChatGPT gives me the key points straight away… Grammarly catches grammar mistakes and suggests better word choices… These tools make learning more interactive and personalised." These perspectives reveal that AI is perceived as a valuable support mechanism that contributes to learning efficiency through immediate, tailored input. In addition to these reflections, several other participants acknowledged shifts in peer collaboration dynamics resulting from AI integration in academic tasks. These include Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 6, Participant 7, Participant 8, Participant 9, Participant 10, Participant 11, Participant 13, Participant 14, Participant 15, Participant 18, Participant 21, Participant 22, Participant 24, Participant 25, Participant 27, Participant 28, Participant 29, Participant 30, Participant 32, Participant 33, Participant 34, Participant 35, Participant 36, Participant 37, Participant 38, Participant 39, Participant 40, Participant 42 and Participant 47. Their responses reflect varying degrees of acceptance and concern, with many acknowledging AI's potential to facilitate idea generation while cautioning against its overuse at the expense of authentic interpersonal interaction.

Increased Engagement and Interest

Several students described AI as a motivating factor in their learning journey. Participant 17 shared, "AI can provide personalised learning experiences… it helps me improve clarity and coherence in writing… I was quite satisfied with the experience because it made the learning process faster and clearer." Similarly, Participant 23 stated, "Using AI sparks new ideas related to the core topic… it instantly provided a variety of approaches to enhance my coding… improving my skills made me feel proud." Participant 33 highlighted the role of AI in stimulating exploration and creativity: "By using AI as a learning tool, I can easily look up a wealth of information… it sparks many new ideas.". Meanwhile, Participant 31 emphasised the convenience and stress reduction afforded by AI tools by stating, "ChatGPT helps me brainstorm ideas or practice conversational English… makes researching way faster and less stressful.". These responses suggest that AI contributes positively to student engagement by encouraging autonomy, experimentation, and creative exploration in learning. Beyond these individual experiences, additional participants also indicated that AI tools enhanced their motivation and interest in learning. These include Participant 5, Participant 13, Participant 15, Participant 16, Participant 22, Participant 24, Participant 25, Participant 27, Participant 29, Participant 32, Participant 36, Participant 39, Participant 40, and Participant 45. Their responses reveal that AI not only streamlines the learning process but also fosters learner autonomy, stimulates creativity, and encourages deeper engagement through accessible and responsive digital support.

Mixed Perceptions on Feedback Quality

Despite recognising the benefits of fast and automated feedback, several students questioned the depth and nuance of AI-generated input. Participant 17 acknowledged, "AI tools like ChatGPT can provide instant suggestions and corrections… but I still feel traditional feedback is more valuable in depth… lecturers give more personalised, detailed feedback." This concern was reiterated by Participant 23, who emphasised the human element, stating "Nothing compares to the guidance of a lecturer… lecturers understand our struggles, emotions, and learning styles." Participant 33 added, "AI provides quick help, but real feedback from lecturers is more impactful… AI lacks the personal touch that helps us improve beyond just fixing grammar." Finally, Participant 31 shared, "AI tools are great for quick and instant feedback… but they can feel robotic… they don't always get the nuance or creativity I'm going for." These reflections indicate that while AI can streamline feedback, its limitations in personalisation, empathy, and contextual understanding are still prominent concerns. In line with these reflections, several other participants expressed similar reservations regarding the limitations of AI-generated feedback when compared to human input. These include Participant 5, Participant 8, Participant 11, Participant 13, Participant 14, Participant 15, Participant 16, Participant 19, Participant 25, Participant 36, Participant 38, Participant 40, and Participant 44. Their responses reflect a recurring concern about the lack of emotional nuance, contextual understanding, and personalised depth in AI feedback, reinforcing the continued value of lecturer-driven responses in the learning process.

Tool Use Over Reliance

The fourth theme revolved around the potential overdependence on AI tools, which some students perceived as a threat to critical thinking and self-development. Participant 31 remarked, "One big concern is becoming too dependent on AI… I might not develop my own critical thinking or language skills.". This was supported by Participant 17, who cautioned, "If students rely too much on AI, they might lose the ability to think critically or write independently." Participant 23 added, "Relying on AI entirely without personal effort defeats the purpose of education… some classmates copied content from AI without rewriting it." Finally, Participant 33 stated, "The benefits of AI ultimately depend on how you use it… AI can be a great tool to assist with work, but not a replacement for personal learning effort." These perspectives highlight a collective awareness among students that AI must be used thoughtfully and in moderation to avoid undermining essential academic skills and autonomy. In addition to the participants previously mentioned, several others raised parallel concerns about the risk of excessive reliance on AI tools in learning environments. These include Participant 4, Participant 6, Participant 15, Participant 19, Participant 20, Participant 21, Participant 24, Participant 25, Participant 29, Participant 32, Participant 35, Participant 44,

Participant 45, Participant 46, and Participant 47. Their observations emphasise a shared apprehension that depending too heavily on AI may hinder the cultivation of essential academic competencies such as independent thinking, personal initiative, and authentic problem-solving.

Together, these themes present a nuanced understanding of AI's role in shaping students' learning experiences. While students largely appreciate AI's support, especially in speed, engagement, and accessibility, they also expressed a clear desire for balance, warning against overreliance and advocating for continued human involvement in learning.

ELT Students' Perceptions Towards Classroom Dynamics

The third analysis element focuses on students' perceptions of how integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into English language teaching (ELT) has affected classroom dynamics. The responses indicate shifting patterns of collaboration, changes in communication and participation, and a broader recognition of AI as a supportive, yet not dominant, tool in the learning environment.

Shift in Student Collaboration

Students stated that they observed a noticeable change in peer collaboration as AI tools became more integrated into academic practices. While some viewed this shift positively, others expressed concerns about reduced interpersonal engagement. Participant 44 remarked, "AI can help generate ideas, provide discussion prompts, and assist with research… However, overreliance on AI may reduce genuine brainstorming and critical thinking, as students might depend too much on AI-generated responses instead of actively engaging with their peers." Similarly, Participant 45 shared, "AI tools can help with group discussions by quickly generating ideas… However, some students rely too much on AI, which can reduce original thinking and interaction." These sentiments were supported by Participant 31, who explained, "Students can use AI-powered brainstorming tools to suggest relevant discussion points…. This is especially useful for tackling complex topics that require multiple perspectives." Participant 17 noted, "Groups could use AI to brainstorm ideas, check grammar, or summarise articles together… But if everyone relies too much on AI, it might reduce the depth of the conversation." In addition to these accounts, many other participants also shared their thoughts on how AI has affected peer collaboration. These include Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 6, Participant 7, Participant 8, Participant 9, Participant 10, Participant 11, Participant 13, Participant 14, Participant 15, Participant 18, Participant 21, Participant 22, Participant 24, Participant 25, Participant 27, Participant 28, Participant 29, Participant 30, Participant 32, Participant 33, Participant 34, Participant 35, Participant 36, Participant 37, Participant 38, Participant 39, Participant 40, Participant 42 and Participant 47. Their responses show that while AI helps generate ideas

and organise group tasks, it may also reduce real-time communication and limit opportunities for deeper student interaction.

Communication and Participation Trends

Integrating AI tools also influenced how students and lecturers communicate, both in and outside the classroom. For many, AI offered efficiency but simultaneously reduced direct interaction. Participant 17 observed, "There hasn't been much direct use or demonstration of AI tools… But if AI supports learning while lecturers stay actively involved, it could improve the relationship." In contrast, Participant 44 expressed concerns that "lecturers may use AI-generated quizzes and discussion prompts… However, increased reliance on AI may reduce direct communication, as students might turn to AI for answers instead of lecturers." For Participant 31, the impact was more personal: "AI has made learning more interactive… But I noticed I am less inclined to approach lecturers. As a result, they may become less familiar with students' specific needs." Similarly, Participant 45 highlighted a change in classroom interaction, noting, "Lecturers encourage discussions about AI-generated ideas… but some students rely more on AI, which could reduce direct interaction.". Other participants also noticed changes in how students and lecturers interact since the introduction of AI tools. These include Participant 2, Participant 4, Participant 6, Participant 8, Participant 10, Participant 13, Participant 14, Participant 18, Participant 19, Participant 21, Participant 24, Participant 25, Participant 27, Participant 28, Participant 29, Participant 30, Participant 32, Participant 33, Participant 34, Participant 35, Participant 36, Participant 38, Participant 39, Participant 40, Participant 42 and Participant 47. Their responses suggest that while AI makes communication faster and more structured, it may also lead to less face-to-face interaction and reduce opportunities for building closer relationships with lecturers.

AI As a Supportive Tool

Despite concerns, many students recognised the potential of AI to support, not to replace, learning when applied thoughtfully. Participant 17 expressed optimism, stating, "AI helps students generate ideas quickly or check grammar… I think AI can potentially increase engagement if used in a guided and balanced way." Likewise, Participant 44 described AI as a helpful classroom asset, noting, "AI can support collaboration… helps refine arguments, check grammar, and organise thoughts… but should not replace real interaction." This was reinforced by Participant 31, who said, "AI contributes to collaboration by helping groups generate ideas… This makes the learning experience more interactive and engaging." Finally, Participant 45 summarised the role of AI as supplementary, sharing, "AI is used more as a support tool… makes interactions more engaging, especially when lecturers encourage discussions around AI-generated ideas." Several other participants also viewed AI as a helpful addition to the learning process when used properly.

These include Participant 2, Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 6, Participant 7, Participant 8, Participant 9, Participant 10, Participant 11, Participant 12, Participant 13, Participant 14, Participant 15, Participant 18, Participant 19, Participant 21, Participant 22, Participant 24, Participant 25, Participant 27, Participant 28, Participant 29, Participant 30, Participant 32, Participant 33, Participant 34, Participant 35, Participant 36, Participant 38, Participant 39, Participant 40, Participant 42 and Participant 47. Their responses reflect the view that AI can improve idea generation, writing, and engagement, as long as it supports rather than replaces teacher guidance and student effort.

In summary, students' reflections on classroom dynamics indicate a delicate balance between innovation and human connection. While AI has introduced valuable tools for enhancing collaboration and participation, the findings highlight the importance of intentional guidance from instructors to ensure that technology complements, rather than replaces, human interaction in the ELT learning environment.

Conclusion

This study investigated how Malaysian higher education students perceive their ELT instructors' readiness to incorporate AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, into classroom instruction. Student feedback revealed four critical areas: the necessity for professional training, variation in instructional strategies and AI tool application, ongoing technical challenges, and the importance of guided, student-centred support to ensure ethical and practical AI use in English language teaching. The results underscore a pressing need for structured and inclusive professional development to strengthen instructors' digital literacy and AI preparedness. Variability in instructors' readiness was attributed to insufficient training, while inconsistencies in pedagogical approaches indicated a lack of clear ethical and instructional frameworks for AI use. This finding is in line with Zimmer and Matthews (2022), who identified instructors' insufficient training in utilising AI as one of the major factors influencing their readiness. Their study highlighted that many teachers, despite having basic digital skills, lacked the necessary training to effectively integrate digital tools for instructional purposes, often leading to inconsistent classroom practices and a reluctance to adopt new technologies. These challenges were compounded by technical constraints such as limited access, financial barriers, and concerns over the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated content. The concern over limited access to AI usage is a critically discussed factor. As noted by Lo (2025), limited access to AI tools, particularly due to regional restrictions, posed significant challenges for educators. Many were compelled to rely on alternative platforms with reduced functionality, which affected classroom implementation. Moreover, Lo (2025) also highlighted financial barriers, noting that certain advanced AI technologies required paid subscriptions or costly infrastructure, thus limiting widespread adoption. In addition, concerns

regarding the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated content were evident, as teachers frequently reported inaccuracies in representing newer English varieties and emphasised the need for manual corrections to ensure linguistic and cultural authenticity in the materials. Subsequently, AI integration was identified to be uneven across classrooms. The findings in the present study indicate that some instructors applied AI tools effectively, whereas others lacked strategic direction or demonstrated uncertainty in implementation. The absence of consistent guidance further contributed to ineffective usage. Infrastructural issues, including affordability, software limitations, and insufficient support, also hindered seamless adoption and pointed to the need for greater institutional backing and comprehensive training. From the learners' perspective, AI tools were acknowledged as applicable, especially in enhancing writing and critical thinking. Concerns were also raised about overreliance and the potential erosion of academic integrity, highlighting the need for ethically sound, student-focused implementation. Collectively, these insights indicate the absence of a coherent instructional strategy for AI integration in ELT contexts. These findings are consistent with Black et al. (2024), who identified significant gaps in ELT instructors' digital competence and noted that inadequate training, pedagogical ambiguity, and infrastructural limitations remain critical barriers to effective AI adoption. Their study further emphasised the importance of equipping instructors with the necessary skills to implement AI meaningfully while upholding pedagogical coherence and ethical standards. Therefore, this further validates that the successful integration of AI tools in English Language Teaching is contingent upon a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that addresses professional development, institutional support, and infrastructural accessibility, while also ensuring the establishment of clear ethical and pedagogical frameworks. Without such systemic interventions, the effective, equitable, and sustainable use of AI in ELT classrooms is likely to remain fragmented and inconsistent.

Next, the analysis on the impact of AI usage by ELT instructors on students' learning experience in the present study underscored that while AI integration enhances learning efficiency and student engagement, it also presents challenges such as mixed perceptions of feedback quality and the potential for over-reliance on technological tools. As previously addressed in the findings section, AI integration in ELT benefits both learners and instructors in terms of learning efficiency and student engagement, where respondents addressed that AI in ELT has the potential to facilitate them in generating ideas both inside and outside of the classroom. Additionally, respondents acknowledged that apart from enabling both learners and instructors to streamline the learning process, it also enables learners to have more autonomy, be more creative, and engage more deeply with the existence of digital support. This corresponds to a study conducted by Chandra et al. (2024), which identified that AI-driven tools, such as intelligent tutoring systems, chatbots, and adaptive learning platforms, empower learners to take greater control over their learning process, promoting autonomy, creativity, and deeper engagement. These tools personalise content delivery based on learner performance and provide instant feedback, which enables students to progress at

their own pace and explore language in more interactive and meaningful ways. To add, a similar notion is addressed by Li (2020), where it was mentioned that the integration of AI into English language instruction enables learners to receive timely feedback, engage in autonomous learning, and access adaptive resources tailored to their individual needs and proficiency levels. According to the study, AI technologies support the transformation from passive reception to active exploration, allowing students to take charge of their learning while improving overall teaching efficiency and learner performance. Nevertheless, the respondents in the present study also highlighted a key concern related to the use of AI in ELT, where the usage must be balanced and monitored to avoid eliminating authentic interpersonal interaction between learners and ELT instructors, as well as over-reliance on its usage. These findings resonate with the work of Guan et al. (2025) and Almegren et al. (2025), where the former stated that excessive dependence on AI tools in language education risks diminishing student engagement, reducing opportunities for communicative interaction, and ultimately weakening the humanistic elements essential to language acquisition. Guan et al. (2025) also emphasised the importance of maintaining a learner-centred approach, recommending that AI be used as a supplementary tool rather than a replacement for the teacher's role, to preserve the interactive and social dimensions of language learning. Similarly, Almegren et al. (2025) correspondingly stated that while AI technologies offer valuable support for language instruction, excessive reliance may hinder the development of essential communicative skills and reduce opportunities for meaningful human interaction. Their study warned that if AI tools are not applied judiciously, they could promote passive learning behaviours and disengagement among students. To address this, Almegren et al. (2025) advocated for pedagogical strategies that blend AI with interactive teaching practices, ensuring that the use of technology enhances rather than substitutes the human element in education. Thus, this suggests that while AI holds significant potential to enhance student autonomy, creativity, and engagement in ELT, its integration must be approached with pedagogical intentionality, ensuring that it complements rather than compromises the human elements of teaching and learning.

Following the discussion on the impact of AI usage on students' learning experience, further analysis of classroom dynamics revealed additional insights into how AI integration has reshaped interactions and participation in English language teaching. One notable shift observed was in peer collaboration. While AI tools were recognised for their ability to facilitate idea generation, research support, and task organisation, concerns were also raised regarding reduced interpersonal engagement. The use of AI-powered brainstorming tools and content generators allowed for faster and more structured group discussions. However, it also led to apprehensions about diminishing critical thinking and meaningful peer-to-peer exchanges. Students acknowledged that although AI contributed positively by simplifying complex discussions and offering multiple perspectives, excessive dependence on such tools could undermine organic interactions and limit the development of collaborative problem-solving skills. This dual impact reflects a

broader challenge in balancing technological efficiency with the cultivation of authentic peer collaboration, as highlighted by a recent study by Zhang et al. (2025), which found that dependency on AI tools has a significant negative relationship with critical thinking. Their study revealed that excessive reliance on AI-generated solutions can diminish individuals' capacity for independent analysis and reflective thinking, thereby undermining their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Zhang et al. (2025) emphasised that while AI tools offer efficiency and immediate access to information, they may inadvertently discourage students from engaging in deep cognitive processes necessary for critical evaluation and autonomous decision-making. Similarly, Gawlik-Kobylińska (2024) reported that frequent use of AI tools can foster behaviours bordering on addiction, ultimately detracting from students' ability to participate meaningfully in traditional collaborative and problem-solving activities. The study noted that such over-reliance on AI not only diminishes critical thinking but also reduces student engagement in organic team-based learning environments. This indicates that although AI provides a significant contribution in terms of learning, where learners and instructors benefit from generating ideas, support in research work, and task organisation, the use of AI needs to be balanced and monitored to avoid diminishing human interaction, collaboration, and critical thinking. In addition, shifts in communication and participation patterns between students and lecturers were also identified. AI tools were seen as enhancing efficiency by offering quick access to learning resources and structured activities such as quizzes and discussion prompts. Nonetheless, this increased convenience occasionally came at the cost of reduced direct communication. Some students indicated that they were less likely to engage in face-to-face consultations with lecturers, potentially weakening the rapport and personal connections necessary for effective learning support. Although AI-enabled interactions contributed to a more streamlined classroom environment, they also risked limiting opportunities for deeper discussions and reducing students' willingness to seek personalised feedback. These findings suggest that while AI can streamline instructional processes and foster interactive learning, careful consideration is required to preserve the relational aspects of the student-lecturer dynamic**.** Findings from studies conducted by Sumak et al. (2024) and Rizvi (2023) further strengthen this view. Sumak et al. (2024) identified that although AI tools enhance learning efficiency through automation and personalisation, their extensive use may inadvertently reduce opportunities for meaningful face-to-face interactions, weakening the student-teacher relationship and diminishing the collaborative learning environment. Similarly, Rizvi (2023) underscored that while AI promotes personalised learning and optimizes administrative tasks, it can also diminish human interaction within classrooms. The study cautioned that excessive automation might erode the crucial role of educators in fostering personal connections and in nurturing students' social and emotional development. Therefore, although AI technologies present considerable opportunities for enhancing educational efficiency, deliberate strategies are required to safeguard the interpersonal and cognitive dimensions of the learning experience. Despite these concerns, there is widespread recognition of

AI's value as a supplementary tool among students. When used intentionally, AI is regarded as an effective aid for refining arguments, checking grammar, and organising thoughts. Students acknowledged that AI enhanced the learning experience by fostering idea generation, supporting collaborative work, and encouraging more engaging classroom interactions, particularly when lecturers facilitated discussions around AI-generated content. However, it was consistently emphasised by the students that AI should remain a supportive element rather than replacing traditional instructional methods. The perspectives gathered underscore the importance of integrating AI in ways that complement human interaction, promote active engagement, and maintain the integrity of collaborative and communicative practises within the ELT classroom. The need for a balanced approach in AI usage has been emphasised by several studies focusing on a similar matter. Guan et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of a holistic integration approach that encourages collaboration between teachers, students, and AI to support, not replace, human interactions in language learning. Their study found that AI-assisted teacher-student interactions can improve language proficiency while maintaining personal connections, creating a learning environment that balances technology and human support. Hence, these findings reinforce the need for a balanced approach that leverages AI's strengths without compromising the essential human elements of language learning. Furthermore, Tian (2023) also stressed the importance of balanced human-AI collaboration in language education. By developing an instructional design model grounded in activity theory, Tian's study highlighted that AI could support lower-level learning tasks, such as grammar and vocabulary. At the same time, human teachers remain central in fostering higher-order skills like critical thinking and creativity. The study emphasised that effective collaboration between teachers and AI can optimise instructional design, ensuring that AI enhances, rather than diminishes, meaningful teacher-student interaction.

This study contributes to the growing discourse on AI in education by centring student voices in evaluating instructor readiness. It calls for a balanced, inclusive, and context-sensitive approach to AI adoption, one that empowers ELT instructors through continuous training and equips them to harness AI as a complementary tool rather than a replacement. As AI continues to reshape educational landscapes, ensuring that instructors are both competent and confident in its use will be critical to fostering meaningful, ethical, and practical language learning experiences (Karataş & Ataç, 2024; Wang & Xing, 2024).

Future research should expand on these findings by incorporating the perspectives of ELT instructors themselves to provide a more holistic understanding of readiness and implementation challenges. Comparative studies across different institutions and countries could uncover contextual factors influencing AI adoption, as highlighted by Lucas et al. (2025). Additionally, longitudinal research tracking the impact of targeted professional development programmes on instructor competence and student outcomes would offer valuable insights. Exploring the ethical dimensions of AI use in ELT, particularly regarding academic

integrity and data privacy, also remains a critical area for further investigation. These directions will help ensure that AI integration in ELT is both practical and inclusive.

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N.M.M.N. conducted all aspects of the research, including conceptualisation, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, writing, original draft preparation, and writing, review and editing. The work was completed solely by the author.

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

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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The Use of Help-Seeking Strategy in Oral Arabic Learning

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Abstract

Researchers have identified the learning environment as one of the most important factors in the learning process, especially for developing oral skills, which require sufficient practice. In Malaysia, students learn Arabic as a second or third language, and many find it challenging to use the language in daily life, particularly for oral practice. Speaking Arabic orally has gotten more challenging since the 2019 coronavirus epidemic, which affected everyone on the planet.Most institutions have turned face-to-face classes into online classes, making oral Arabic practice more difficult. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the extent to which students seek help if they face difficulties in learning oral Arabic. This study was conducted at the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia. It is a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative study using a questionnaire of self-regulated learning strategies and interviews. 445 samples were involved in the quantitative data, which were selected based on the stratified random sampling, while the qualitative data involved 13 interviews. Overall, this study found that the level at which students sought help if they faced problems in learning oral Arabic was high. However, they sought help from their peers more often than from their course instructors. As a result, this study suggested using peers as learning assistants and the internet as a communication tool between students and instructors.

Keywords: *help-seeking strategy, MSLQ, self-regulated learning, Arabic language learning, oral Arabic skills*

Introduction

Arabic has been taught in Malaysia as a second or third language. Although it is closely related to Islam, the official religion of Malaysia, it has not been used as a language for daily communication among Malaysians. It is primarily used in school settings under teachers' supervision. Furthermore, during the coronavirus pandemic that began in 2019, practicing oral Arabic became more difficult. Most face-to-face classes shifted to online sessions. Students found it hard to communicate with each other and to discuss with teachers. In this context, ensuring that students learning Arabic develop strong oral skills is a significant challenge. One strategy that can be used is to employ a help-seeking approach.

Literature Review

Based on the self-regulated learning strategic framework, the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) by Pintrich et al. (1991) identifies help-seeking strategy as one of the sub-components of the learning resource management strategy. Help-seeking strategy focuses on managing learning support from external parties like lecturers and peers to improve learning performance. A good learner knows how to seek the right sources when facing difficulties in learning (Pintrich, et al., 1991; Hsu, 1997; Rhee & Pintrich, 2004; Lynch, 2006; Fong et al., 2023; Yang, F. et al., 2024). In this case, a good Arabic learner is someone who knows who to rely on when facing challenges in learning oral Arabic. They can utilize surrounding resources to solve their problems.

The concept of help-seeking strategy is derived from Vygotsky's theory, which explains the development of cognitive control as a social process occurring in stages. It also stems from learning initiative, which initially depends on others before shifting to rely on self-effort (Hsu, 1997; Van Meter & Stevens, 2000). Before self-regulated learning occurs, learning depends on other people, such as friends and lecturers, who are able to support an individual's learning needs. Comparing a learner's performance with that of a more competent individual can lead to collaborative learning, which continues until similar competence is achieved (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Van Meter & Stevens, 2000). Vygotsky's theory also explains that humans have the ability to modify their environment to suit their needs, rather than merely responding passively to it as described in behaviorist theory (Schunk, 1996).

Oral skills include listening and speaking skills. There are several previous studies carried out at the UiTM level that investigate the level of learners' oral skills in Arabic (Sahabudin, 2003; Norhayuza et al., 2004). These studies, in general, conclude that UiTM students are still weak in oral skills even though they have studied Arabic at the school level. The level of utilisation of self-regulated learning strategies is among the elements contributing to this predicament. This is due to the correlation between students' performance and the extent of self-regulated learning technique use (VanZile-Tamsen & Livingston, 1999; Al-Alwan, 2008).

Concerning this, several studies have been conducted to examine the level of use of several components of self-regulated learning strategy among UiTM students (Ghazali Yusri & Nik Mohd Rahimi, 2010; Ghazali Yusri et al., 2010a, 2010b). However, these studies did not focus on the use of the help-seeking strategy. According to Moore (2008), Fong et al (2023), and Jiang and Yu (2025), students who attended sessions on help-seeking strategy recorded better grades than those who did not. Realizing the importance of the help-seeking strategy in the learning of Arabic oral skills, a study on this area must be conducted so that further action can be planned to assist students in their learning.

There are two research questions for this study:

1. To what extent have the UiTM students used the help-seeking strategy in learning oral Arabic?
2. How do UiTM students seek help in learning oral Arabic?

Methodology

Arabic is one of the compulsory three-semester third language courses to be completed by all UiTM undergraduates. It is estimated that 2600 full-time students enrol in this third-level Arabic as a Second Language course throughout UiTM. Based on this population, this study has selected 445 respondents, a sufficient number for any generalization to be made on the actual population (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Respondents were chosen to follow the stratified random sampling technique that is based on the different faculty clusters in UiTM.

Additionally, we used a disproportionate sampling method because student course participation varied across faculties. Furthermore, only students enrolled in UiTM's highest-level Arabic course (level three) participated in the survey. The rationale for this is that the respondents of this level have gone through all the levels of Arabic learning and gained enough experience to which they have developed their distinct attitude in using the help-seeking strategy in dealing with challenges in the learning process.

This study is a mixed-methods study and employs a survey and an interview as tools for data collection. The questionnaire used in the survey has been adapted from The Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) by Pintrich et al (1991) with 7 Likert scale. Before the conduct of the survey, written permission was secured from the owner of MSLQ. Furthermore, the questionnaire was later translated into Bahasa Melayu to accommodate the Malay respondents. Three translation experts have been referred to validate the translation process. The questionnaire has also gone through a content validity process with three experts and three students involved in the face validity process. Finally, before the commencement of the actual survey, the Cronbach's alpha value of the questionnaire was analyzed to determine its reliability. Through the analysis, the Cronbach's alpha value was recorded to be 0.74, an acceptable validity value (Sekaran, 2003).

After the actual data had been gathered, a descriptive analysis was conducted to identify the mean of the help-seeking strategy for all respondents. To interpret the descriptive data, this study has divided the mean scores into three levels as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of Levels of Likert Scale Mean Scores (Adapted from Nik Mohd Rahimi, 2004)

Mean Score	Level
5.01 to 7.00	High
3.10 to 5.00	Moderate
1.00 to 3.00	Low

Besides this, interview sessions were also carried out in this study using an MP3 player. The recorded interview sessions were later coded, given dates, and verbatim transcribed. Before the transcribed interview was analyzed, respondents' verification was sought. Then, the data was analyzed using NVIVO7 as to create the related themes. The created themes were later referred to experts, and Cohen Kappa analysis was carried out to measure their agreement.

13 students were involved in the interview. Four of them represent the Science and Technology cluster, six from the Social sciences cluster, and the rest represent the Business management cluster. Besides that, concerning the students' Arabic learning experience, six of them had completed Arabic learning up to the upper secondary level, three up to primary school level, and four had no Arabic learning experience.

The variation of the students' level of Arabic learning and also the cluster of where they are from is crucial to be considered in the research design so that a more comprehensive and varied perspective of the issue can be gathered.

Findings

Table 2: Help Seeking Strategy: Descriptive Analysis

Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation(SD)	Interpretation
Peers' help	5.81	.89	High
Lecturers' help	4.95	1.34	Moderate
Overall	5.36	.73	High

Table 2 shows the mean value of the help seeking component for all the respondents is high (M=5.36, SP=.73). The finding also reveals that the help-seeking strategy among peers is higher (M=5.81, SP=.89) compared to the lecturers (M=4.95, SP=1.34).

Based on interviews, students were found to seek help from their peers as well as from their seniors when facing difficulties in learning. There are also students who seek help from their peers initially, but later turn to their lecturers. Among the comments from those students:

> "What is important in learning, to me, is that we must have someone else (to seek help)... friends to study... I just can't... being sleepy is one thing... but he will... I will ask him to teach me... if I study alone... if I am not clear of things... and who shall I ask... that's what makes me feel lazy to do."
>
> (Informant 11, female, 21 years old)

> "...Refer to friends a lot... we also have seniors who are taking arabic too... so, maybe we refer to them because they have gone through it earlier than us."

(Informant 5, female, 21 years old)

"Err... normally friends first... but if it is complicated or something... then only (I) consult (lecturers)."

(Informant 1, female 21 years old)

Among the factors that caused the students to seek help from their peers is that they see their peers or seniors in some cases as a source of reference, they are shy of their lecturers, and they also have a tight learning timetable. These factors were picked up from the interview, as some of them said:

"...If I study alone... if I am not clear of things... and who shall I ask... that what makes me feel lazy to do."

(Informant 11, female, 21 years old)

"Question: More to friends...
Answer: Haha...because (I am) shy (with the lecturer) I guess..."

(Informant 2, male, 22 years old)

"Our schedule is packed... so, how to meet the *Ustaz* if we have to... too long... so, instead of that long wait... it is better to ask our friends... I am always with them (friends)."

(Informant 4, female, 21 years old)

Besides, it is also due to their close relationship they have with their friends and the difficulty that they face in meeting up with their lecturers. They say:

"...This is because, to me, meeting (asking) the lecturer would be the last resort... friends are much closer to us... sometimes... they (friends) know what we don't understand because we are in the same boat, right?"

(Informant 4, female, 21 years old)

"I refer more to my friends tahn my lecturer because it is difficult to meet the Arabic lecturer because we are not in the same faculty... we can only meet once a week."

(Informant 5, female, 21 years old)

Beside referring to friends, they also refer to dictionary, family members and lecturers. They say:

"Most importantly it is a must have... whatever it is we have to... have dictionary... it's important."

(Informant 11, female, 21 years old)

> "...If I am at home I learn either with my brother or my younger brother... I learn from someone who knows better than me."
>
> (Informant 11, female, 21 years old)

> "...If I don't understand... I will ask *Ustaz* (lecturer) directly."
>
> (Informant 12, female, 21 years old)

Among the reasons for the students to refer to the lecturers is that the lecturers are considered to be the most qualified people, and they normally ask questions in class. This is reflected in the data from the interview when they say:

> "Even the Arabs don't understand... and if (I) don't understand and ask friend... (my) friend will give me something else (wrong answer)... so, (it is) better to ask those who teach us."
>
> (Informant 7, female, 21 years old)

> "To me, if I want to ask that Ustaz (lecturer)... (If I) ask in class... ha... Ustaz (lecturer) teaches us a little... if (we) don't understand... ask directly."
>
> (Informant 3, female, 21 years old)

Discussion

The study has found that the level of help-seeking strategy for all the students is high. However, it has also been discovered that the use of help help-seeking strategy is higher with friends than lecturers. This is in line with the findings by Ohta and Nakaone (2004) and Alexitch (2002). Alexitch (2002) relates the use of this strategy to students' high intrinsic motivation instead of their extrinsic motivation. Furthermore, a study by Song et al. (2017) revealed that queries triggered by students have created a collaborative atmosphere and engagement in learning activities among the students.

In help seeking, students' dependence on peers rather than lecturers is caused by several factors that have been identified in the data collected from the interview sessions. The first factor is the learning environment of oral Arabic at UiTM. Arabic courses are offered by APB to all faculties in UiTM to which are located quite far from one another and scattered all over the campus. Due to this, lecturers who have been given the hours to teach at a particular faculty will only be able to be at the faculty at the stipulated time. Lecturers also do not have a dedicated room at each faculty to allow any meeting or discussion with students to take place. As a result, student find it difficult to meet their lecturers. Students also have a very minimal chance of consulting their lecturers, except for the limited opportunity they have during class to do so. Normally, after class, students and lecturers will rush to fulfill their other working commitments, which also include attending classes located at different venues. Furthermore, both lecturers and students will only

meet again the following week as the contact hours allotted for the Arabic course are only two hours a week. There is no suitable time for both parties to meet and discuss, except for a specially arranged time agreed by both parties, which in reality is also scarce and limited.

The second factor is related to students' issues. It has been identified through the responses in the interview that students feel shy to refer or meet the lecturers because they do not want to reveal their weaknesses or difficulties they face in the course. This finding is in line with studies conducted by Ewald (2007), Ghaith and Diab (2008), and Newman (2002). Students were found to be more comfortable meeting and discussing the problems with their peers, especially their close friends, compared to the lecturers. They feel more secure in seeking help from this group and do not feel that their self-esteem is at stake when their weakness in learning is exposed to others. Similar reasons, as reported in previous studies (Holmes, 2003), are used by students in choosing their study group members so that they will feel more comfortable in learning. This has also supported other studies that have been carried out (Newman, 2002; Fan et al., 2009). In addition to this, more intelligent students have always being seen as arrogant when they do not give the right response to the questions raised by others (Ghazali Yusri, et al., 2010b) and their intention to correct mistakes among their peers are seen to be an act of showing off (Yoshida, 2008).

Data from the interview shows that students seek help from their peers as well as their seniors when faced with difficulties in learning. Some students rely on friends for help, but later turn to lecturers. This echoes the finding by Yoshida (2008), who states that students, in seeking help in learning, will eventually turn to the lecturers to verify what they have discussed earlier with their friends. This is because the lecturers are seen by the students to be the experts in learning.

Implications

This study has revealed that students prefer to seek help from their peers when facing difficulties in learning oral Arabic. Therefore, this study proposes two suggestions to improve the learning of Arabic. First, intensify the function of teaching assistants among students who have acceptable ability in oral Arabic through a special appointment that is recognised by APB and UiTM.

Several previous studies like Rodriguez-Sabater (2005) and Roscoe and Chi (2007) have looked into the aspect of using learning assistants among students and discovered that it has a positive effect on both students and the learning assistant. Learning assistants have to be tested and have to pass a certain level of the language skills index. They need to be trained on how to supervise students or their peers, and the training also includes how to conduct group activities and other related learning activities. Similar findings are also reported by Fuchs et al. (1999) as well as Fuchs dan Fuchs (2005). They have developed a learning strategy for reading skills called Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS). In a more recent development,

Puranik, Patchan, and Lemons (2017) shared similar findings and developed Peer-Assisted Writing Strategies (PAWS), where they found that students who used PAWS showed positive and significant improvement in reading skills compared to the control group. Furthermore, Jones, G. et al. (2017), in a similar context, reported improvement in reading skills among the students who received help from peers in their learning. Ko (2020) also studied the factors of using Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) that contribute to the success of improving students' ability in reading skills. A similar study to Ko (2020) is Priestly (2020), who studied PALS in increasing reading comprehension of the biology test.

It was also noted from this study that among the factors that have caused the students to have fewer meetings with the lecturers is the limitations of time and space. Therefore, this study proposes the second move to improve students' learning, which is to utilize the use of internet as a platform for discussion to be carried out between students and lecturers, an initiative that has been taken by UiTM through the use of i-Learn. Besides this, lecturers can also opt for a more open platform, like a blog and website, to create an interactive learning environment. The existence of such platforms, however, may not be effective if students as well as lecturers are not trained on how to use them effectively. Training is an important element in any initiative involving the use of technology. Elbassiouny (2006), in his research in Egypt, highlighted that teachers who are not ready to embrace internet facilities have caused the low use of internet facilities and not due to the unavailability of such facilities.

Conclusion

This study discovered that UiTM students used the help-seeking strategy at a level that is considered high. Despite this, they prefer to seek help from peers rather than lecturers, due to circumstances including lack of time, space, and internal problems. As a result, the study makes two recommendations in regards to learning oral Arabic in UiTM: (1) using a student-selected learning assistant and (2) using the internet as a medium for students and lecturers to discuss issues. During the 2019 pandemic, online classes have taken place in most of the oral Arabic learning. Students need to use online discussion to communicate with each other and to discuss with lecturers. However, some new issues have arisen which are related to both technical issues, such as problems in internet connection, and also students' attitudes. Being at home in most of the time because of the movement-controlled order which has been imposed by the Malaysian government, they seem to be complacent about communicating in Malay language rather than Arabic. This issue needs a separate study, which is not covered by this research.

Author Contributions

All authors conceived the study and contributed to the data interpretation and literature review. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Exploring Expository Essay Writing Processes and Strategies: A Case Study of Two Chinese EFL Non-English Majors

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates the expository essay writing processes and strategies of two Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) non-English major students at an applied university in China. The study emerged from the limited understanding of how non-English major students approach and navigate L2 writing tasks, alongside the lack of pedagogical support that addresses both their cognitive and emotional needs. Using a combination of think-aloud protocols, semi-structured interviews, retrospective reflections, and writing sample analyses, this research closely examines how learners engage in the recursive stages of writing, including planning, drafting, reviewing, and monitoring their progress. The analysis reveals that, while both participants utilized similar strategies, such as bilingual thinking, self-monitoring, and verbal rehearsing, they exhibited significant differences in other key areas. Student A demonstrated a dynamic, reflective approach to writing, but struggled with emotional burdens that affected her overall process, while Student B exhibited a more structured approach with consistent execution and greater emotional resilience. The findings underscore the crucial role of metacognitive strategies, emotional regulation, and task-specific planning in shaping students' writing outcomes. By emphasizing the importance of addressing cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors, this study contributes to learner-centered writing instruction by advocating for individualized approaches that integrate cognitive, linguistic, and affective dimensions of L2 writing.

Keywords: *China, EFL non-English majors, expository essay writing, writing process, writing strategies*

Introduction

Background of the Study

Writing is a complex, cognitively demanding process that requires the integration of multiple skills, including idea generation, organization, linguistic accuracy, and revision. For Chinese EFL non-English majors, mastering expository writing is particularly challenging due to limited exposure to English, insufficient instruction in writing strategies, and a general lack of awareness regarding effective writing processes (Xiao, 2007; Zhao, 2012). The College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) is a nationwide English proficiency exam in China designed for non-English majors. It assesses students' ability to use English in both academic and real-life contexts. The writing section, which is the first part of the test, requires students to compose a 120–150-word expository essay within 30 minutes. Prompts are typically based on a topic, outline, or visual stimulus, and the essay is evaluated based on idea development, organization, linguistic

accuracy, and task appropriateness. Students must articulate their views clearly, provide logical reasoning, and support their ideas effectively. However, despite the significance of this section, many test-takers consistently score poorly, revealing their struggles with both the writing process and the strategic skills required for effective writing (Meng, 2011). Although effective writing generally follows a recursive process involving planning, drafting, revising, and editing, research shows that many Chinese EFL learners adopt a linear or translation-based approach that bypasses key stages of development (Len & Yang, 2015). Additionally, metacognitive and self-regulation strategies—such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, and reflection—are often underutilized, further impeding writing proficiency and overall performance (Yasuda, 2015).

Research Problem and Rationale

Research on L2 writing has evolved significantly, yet expository essay writing remains underexplored, particularly in China. Existing studies primarily focus on argumentative and narrative writing, often neglecting critical processes like prewriting, transcribing, and revising in expository writing. Similarly, research on writing strategies has emphasized proficiency-based differences but lacks insight into strategy use for expository essays among non-English major students.

Since the 1970s, research on cognitive processes in writing has been a key focus in language education. However, in L2 writing, Chinese studies have lagged behind international research, primarily emphasizing textual outcomes over writing processes. Recent studies have begun exploring L2 writing processes, investigating aspects such as proficiency-based differences (Chang, 2020), read-to-write composing (Li, 2016), and online writing behaviors (Xu & Xia, 2021). Other research has examined pausing patterns and revision strategies (Xu, 2018; Shen & Chen, 2021). Despite these efforts, most studies focus on argumentative and narrative writing, leaving expository essay composition underexplored. There is a need to examine key processes such as prewriting, transcribing, and revising. Specifically, research should assess the effectiveness of prewriting techniques such as brainstorming, outlining, and concept mapping in enhancing idea generation and organization. Additionally, studies should explore how EFL learners transcribe ideas into coherent texts and revise for clarity, coherence, and complexity. Understanding these aspects will inform instructional strategies and improve students' analytical and communicative skills. Addressing these gaps will contribute to L2 writing models and provide insights into Chinese non-English major students' experiences with expository essay composition.

Research on writing strategies among college students has explored their correlation with writing achievement and effectiveness across linguistic contexts. For instance, Chen (2011) and Chien (2012) examined the predictive role of writing strategies in English writing performance, while Guo and Huang (2020) analyzed strategy use among Chinese international postgraduate students in both L1 and L2 writing.

Xu's studies on revision strategies (Xu & Qi, 2017; Xu, 2018; Xu & Xia, 2021) highlight how strategic writing aids in managing cognitive load. Despite these advancements, further research is needed to validate process-oriented approaches in college English instruction. Current studies often focus on specific groups, such as proficient English majors (Wang & Han, 2017; Hu, 2022), which limits generalizability. Additionally, Kao and Reynolds (2017) reclassified Oxford's (1990) strategy taxonomy, emphasizing the need for task-specific strategy research. A significant gap remains in understanding expository essay writing strategies, particularly among non-English major Chinese university students. Future research should examine strategy use across different writing stages and proficiency levels to identify common challenges and inform targeted instructional interventions, ultimately improving students' writing competence.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research is to investigate the expository essay writing processes and strategies employed by two non-English major students at an applied university in China within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. This study aims to explore how these students navigate the various stages of the writing process, including prewriting, drafting, and revising, while examining the specific strategies they use to generate ideas, organize their arguments, and improve the coherence and clarity of their essays. By focusing on two individual cases, this research seeks to analyze the similarities and differences in their writing processes and strategy use, and offer recommendations for improving their overall writing effectiveness.

Research Questions

1. How do the two Chinese EFL non-English major students engage in the processes when composing expository essays?
2. How do the two Chinese EFL non-English major students utilize various writing strategies throughout different processes of the expository essay writing?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study examines the writing processes and the strategies involved in expository essay writing. By analyzing prominent models within each domain, the study aims to elucidate the interconnections between various components. Specifically, it investigates the stages of the writing process and the diverse strategies that writers employ to develop their essays effectively.

Models of Writing Process

Writing process models have evolved to better understand text composition, incorporating cognitive, social, and procedural elements. **Flower and Hayes' (1981)** cognitive composing model presents writing as a recursive process involving planning, translating, reviewing, and monitoring. Planning generates ideas, organizes content, and sets goals by retrieving and structuring information. Translating converts these plans into written text. Reviewing improves text quality through reading and editing for coherence and correctness. Monitoring regulates these processes, helping writers manage their composition. Though the stages appear linear, they are interconnected and recur throughout writing, highlighting the complex cognitive engagement in producing well-structured texts. **Hayes's (1996)** revised model expands on the 1981 framework, emphasizing the task environment and individual factors like motivation and cognition. The process includes Reflection for reasoning, Text Production to convert thoughts into writing, and Text Interpretation to ensure coherence through rereading. This model highlights writing as an interactive cognitive process influenced by both internal and external factors. **Kellogg's (1996)** model emphasizes the role of working memory in writing through three components: Formulation, Execution, and Monitoring. Formulation includes Planning (goal setting) and Translating (converting ideas into language). Execution involves Programming (preparing motor actions) and Executing (transcribing). Monitoring consists of Reading (verifying coherence) and Editing (aligning intentions with output). This model highlights writing as a cognitive process with ongoing planning, transcription, and revision. **Williams' (2003)** Phase Model of Writing presents eight recursive stages: prewriting, planning, drafting, pausing, reading, revising, editing, and publishing. Prewriting generates ideas through brainstorming and discussion, while planning addresses audience and organization. Drafting develops content over time, with pausing for reflection. Reading compares the draft with initial plans to ensure coherence. Revising involves large-scale changes, often using feedback, while editing refines grammar, punctuation, and style. Publishing presents the final text to its audience. The model highlights writing as a dynamic, non-linear process shaped by ongoing reflection and revision. **Abdel Latif's (2021)** model emphasizes writing as an iterative, reflective process. Monitoring guides task management and self-questioning, while content search retrieves ideas and language options. Ideational planning organizes content across text levels, and linguistic rehearsing refines sentences. Reviewing ensures accuracy through L1 use and rereading. Transcribing converts ideas into written form, and text revising enhances the draft through additions, deletions, substitutions, and reordering at multiple linguistic levels.

Drawing on the key features of the models proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981), Hayes (1996), Kellogg (1996), Williams (2003), and Abdel Latif (2021), this study synthesizes a comprehensive framework to analyze the expository essay writing processes of two Chinese non-English major students. Each model contributes distinct perspectives: cognitive processing (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Kellogg, 1996),

interaction with social and environmental contexts (Hayes, 1996), the incorporation of recursive and reflective phases (Williams, 2003), and self-regulation and monitoring (Abdel Latif, 2021). This synthesized model incorporates planning, writing, reviewing, and monitoring as dynamic and recursive components, while also acknowledging the influence of task environment, working memory, and individual metacognitive engagement. Table 1 presents this integrated writing process model, which serves as the analytical framework for examining how the participants develop their expository essays.

Table 1: Writing Process Model

Category	Sub-Category	Description
Planning	**Goal Setting**	Writers establish goals, stance, organization, and key points.
	Idea Generating	Writers develop ideas using discussions, outlining, and prewriting techniques.
Writing	**Drafting**	Writers create an initial draft using various strategies like free writing and talk-writing.
	Rehearsing	Writers refine sentence structures, arguments, and organization before inclusion.
	Transcribing	Writers convert ideas into written form based on a structured plan.
Reviewing	**Evaluating**	Writers analyze and refine text for coherence, meaning, and language accuracy.
	Revising	Writers correct errors and improve sentence structure, style, and alignment with goals.
Monitoring	**Monitoring**	Writers regulate the writing process, assess progress, and ensure coherence.

Models of Writing Strategies

Writing strategies are essential techniques used throughout the writing process, helping writers effectively plan, compose, and revise their texts. Several key models have emerged to explain the strategies employed during writing, with a focus on cognitive, metacognitive, and social approaches. **Arndt's (1987)** study identified eight key ESL writing strategies based on the composing behaviors of six Chinese postgraduate EFL students. These include planning and global planning to organize content, rehearsing to test ideas, and repeating words to maintain flow. Rereading supports coherence, while questioning aids in clarifying ideas. Revising refines meaning, and editing corrects language errors. Arndt also highlighted protocol analysis as a valuable tool for diagnosing weaknesses and fostering self-evaluation, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of the writing process. **Wenden's (1991)** study focused on the metacognitive strategies ESL students use to regulate writing. Key strategies include planning to generate and organize content, and evaluation through questioning, revising, and editing for clarity. Monitoring allows writers to track progress and adjust as needed, while resourcing involves repeating language chunks and using reduction strategies. The use of L1 also aids in idea generation and transcription. Together, these strategies promote coherence,

organization, and effective problem-solving in the writing process. **Victori (1995)** identified key ESL writing strategies through interviews and think-aloud protocols. These include planning to structure content, monitoring to track progress, and evaluating to reassess goals. Resourcing involves using external references for language support, while repeating aids fluency through the reuse of language chunks. Reduction strategies help manage difficulties by simplifying or rewording text. The use of L1 supports idea generation and accurate transcription. Together, these strategies enhance organization, coherence, and problem-solving throughout the writing process. **Abdel Latif's (2021)** writing strategy model outlines the cognitive and linguistic processes of writing as dynamic and recursive. Writers begin with monitoring, setting goals, and regulating motivation. They use memory retrieval strategies like self-questioning and verbal repetition, followed by ideational planning at various text levels. Linguistic rehearsing enhances clarity through sentence and word practice. Reviewing involves summarizing, rereading, and using L1 for coherence. Transcribing converts ideas into written form, while revising refines the text through addition, deletion, or reordering. The model emphasizes the continuous interplay of planning, reviewing, and revising throughout the writing process.

Drawing on the key writing strategy models outlined above, a comprehensive framework emerges that highlights the cognitive, metacognitive, and linguistic dimensions of the writing process. Across Arndt (1987), Wenden (1991), Victori (1995), and Abdel Latif (2021), common strategies such as planning, monitoring, evaluating, revising, and editing are consistently emphasized. These models also underscore the dynamic, recursive nature of writing, where strategies such as rehearsing, repeating, and the use of the first language (L1) play a supportive role in idea generation, language use, and problem-solving. Together, these models provide an integrated lens through which to analyze the expository essay writing strategies employed by two Chinese non-English major students, as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Writing Strategies Model

Category	Sub-Category	Description
Assigning Goals	Goal-setting	Writers establish objectives, clarifying purpose, scope, and direction.
Idea Planning	Planning	Writers generate and organize ideas at different levels.
Generating Ideas	Guidelines	Writers use structured methods to generate ideas.
	Filled Pausing	Writers use "um" or "er" to maintain writing flow.
	Verbalizing	Writers verbalize thoughts for better recall.
Drafting	Outlining	Writers create flexible outlines for structure.
	Note-taking	Writers capture ideas and research for reference.
	Organizing	Writers arrange content logically.
Retrieving	Plan & Info Retrieval	Writers recall plans and relevant details from memory.
Rehearsing	Sentence, Phrase, Word Rehearsing	Writers refine expression, clarity, and accuracy.

Problem-Solving	Reduction	Writers adjust by removing or paraphrasing content.
	Looking for Models	Writers draw inspiration from external sources.
Transcribing	Translating & Writing	Writers convert ideas into written form.
Reviewing	Questioning, Rereading, Evaluating	Writers check organization, coherence, and accuracy.
Revising	Plan & Text Changes	Writers adjust content for clarity and effectiveness.
Monitoring	Task & Self-Monitoring	Writers track progress, manage cognitive load, and regulate motivation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate the expository essay writing experiences of two Chinese non-English major students in tertiary education. The research aims to understand the writing processes and strategies that these students use during essay composition. A case study design was chosen for its strength in examining real-life contexts, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the participants' experiences.

Participants

Two second-year non-English major students (pseudonyms: Pearl and Lily) from a Chinese university participated in the study. Selected for their intermediate English proficiency and willingness to share their writing experiences, they had prior exposure to college-level writing through textbook-based training, which helped them develop essential writing skills. Their preparation for the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4), which includes a writing component, motivated them to practice writing and familiarize themselves with CET-4 composition types. This experience made them ideal for the think-aloud technique, as their familiarity with CET-4 tasks enabled them to effectively articulate their cognitive processes during writing.

Data Collection Methods

This study employed a multi-method approach to data collection, including Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs), semi-structured interviews, retrospective interviews, and writing sample analysis. The think-aloud protocol (TAP) was used in this study to capture participants' cognitive processes during L2 expository essay writing. This introspective method, widely used in writing research (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Qi & Lapkin, 2001), involved participants verbalizing their thoughts while composing. TAPs provided detailed insights into writing strategies, challenges, and coping mechanisms. Audio and video recordings of the process allowed researchers to analyze participants' mental activity (Ericsson & Simon, 1993). Chosen for its ability to reveal cognitive processes, TAP had been foundational in writing research and contributed to understanding L2 writing processes and developing comprehensive writing models. Each participant underwent a semi-structured interview before the think-aloud session, which focused on their perceptions of English

writing, past writing experiences, and educational backgrounds, using open-ended questions to encourage detailed responses. Retrospective interviews involved participants reviewing their think-aloud video recordings of writing tasks, reflecting on specific moments like pauses. They were asked to explain their thoughts, challenges, and strategies during writing. Probing questions uncovered decision-making, cognitive processes, and writing techniques. These interviews aimed to gain insights into EFL writing practices, strategies, and challenges, enhancing understanding of cognitive mechanisms and effective writing strategies through analysis of samples and draft notes. The writing sample analysis evaluated grammatical errors, coherence, organization, and linguistic accuracy in three expository essays from each participant based on CET-4 writing standards. Each student wrote three essays on the following topics: “The Importance of Environmental Protection”, “How to Treat Senior Citizens in Modern Society”, and “The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Modern Society”. For each task, they were required to write a composition of 120 to 180 words.

Data Analysis

This study employed a systematic and theory-driven thematic analysis to explore the L2 expository essay writing processes and strategies of non-English major students. Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs), retrospective interviews, and pre-task semi-structured interviews were transcribed and verified by participants. Detailed behavioral descriptions were created based on these sources and writing samples. Guided by established models (e.g., Creswell & Poth’s (2018); Braun & Clarke, 2006), the author conducted a theoretical thematic analysis (i.e., coding, categorizing, and developing themes), focusing on writing processes and strategies. Coding targeted key areas and emphasized individual variation through participant-specific theme generation. A comparative analysis was then conducted to identify shared and unique themes, offering both general insights and nuanced differences in cognitive and strategic writing behaviors. Table 3 presents the coding system, including the main themes, categories, and illustrative data excerpts.

Table 3: Coding System of Qualitative Data

Theme	Code (Subcategory)	Description	Data Example (Excerpt from Text)
Pre-Writing Cognitive Strategies	Topic Translation	Translating topic into L1 to aid understanding	"Pearl read the essay topic... and translated it into Chinese..."
	Idea Generation in L1	Using Chinese to brainstorm ideas	"She came up with an idea in Chinese... ‘环境保护已经成为了一件相当严峻的事情’"

	Outline Planning	Organizing structure in L1 with numbered points	"Then she wrote down the number 1... and drew a long line..."
Language Problem-Solving	Vocabulary Substitution	Using synonyms when stuck on a word	"She thought of another word 'significant' that is similar to 'crucial'"
	Translation Adjustments	Revising translations when initial English attempts were unsatisfactory	"She said 'it is...', but didn't seem to think of how to express it"
	Use of Draft Symbols	Drawing lines and circles as memory cues or placeholders	"She drew a horizontal line below... to remind herself to check for the correct expression"
Metacognitive Monitoring	Self-Correction During Planning	Revising outline or concept while planning	"She sighed and said 'oh', then changed her idea to 'as far as I know'"
	Self-Evaluation of Expression	Judging the quality or effectiveness of a sentence during writing	"Why do I feel like this sentence is so empty?"
Writing While Thinking	Simultaneous Writing and Verbalizing	Writing while speaking aloud the thought process	"She wrote while speaking on the essay paper..."
	L1-L2 Code-switching	Alternating between Chinese and English during writing and thinking	"She speaks English directly when she can... relies on Chinese when she cannot"
Affective Strategies	Expressing Emotion (Sighs, Frustration)	Displaying emotions when encountering difficulty	"She sighed twice... said she was a bit distracted and tired"
	Motivational Self-Talk	Using internal dialogue to maintain focus	"She muttered to herself... 'Add a relative clause'"
Revision and Monitoring	Word Count Awareness	Checking and adjusting length to meet task requirements	"She muttered to herself, 'Wow, it's definitely not enough'"
	On-the-spot Lexical Revisions	Replacing vocabulary during the act of writing	"She changed it to 'just like animals, plants and so on'"
Rhetorical Strategy Use	Use of Linking Devices	Employing cohesive devices (e.g., 'initially', 'additionally')	"She wrote 'initially'... then 'additionally'"
	Citing Proverbs	Using culturally familiar sayings to enrich content	"She added: 'Just as an old saying goes...'"
Problem-Avoidance Strategy	Skipping Unknown Words	Avoiding words when unsure of spelling or meaning	"She decided to give up... used 'who are in need' instead"

Findings

This study explored the expository essay writing processes, and strategies of two Chinese EFL non-English major students, Pearl and Lily. Through a detailed analysis of their writing behaviors, it was found that both participants engaged in a four-phase recursive writing process—planning, drafting, reviewing, and monitoring—consistent with Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive composing model. However, individual differences in their strategy use revealed varying levels of effectiveness.

Writing Processes of the Participants

The writing processes of Pearl and Lily were analyzed across four primary stages: Planning, Writing, Reviewing, and Monitoring. A detailed thematic analysis revealed both similarities and differences in their approaches, with key insights emerging at each stage.

In the planning stage, both Pearl and Lily used structured approaches to goal setting and idea generation. Pearl translated essay titles into Chinese for comprehension, while Lily underlined key terms to maintain focus. Both brainstormed bilingually, but Pearl relied more on Chinese, which slowed her writing, while Lily used visual tools to stay aligned with the theme. Pearl followed rigid high school templates, limiting creativity, whereas Lily used a "general-specific-general" format, offering a more flexible, systematic structure. For example, Pearl translated the essay title "The Importance of Environmental Protection" into Chinese and reiterated it to reinforce her understanding of the task. In contrast, Lily underlined key terms such as "importance" and "protection" in the title, ensuring that her content remained focused on the core theme. Table 4 outlines the similarities and differences between the two participants' planning processes, focusing on goal setting, idea generation, and the use of templates.

Table 4: Comparison of Participants' Planning Stage

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Goal Setting	Structured, translating essay titles into Chinese to ensure understanding.	Structured and purposeful, highlighting key terms to maintain focus on the central theme.	Both use structured approaches with goal setting.	Pearl relies more on translation than Lily.
Idea Generating	Generates ideas by brainstorming in Chinese and translating to English.	Uses bilingual thinking, writes down Chinese phrases and translates them into English.	Both use bilingual thinking for idea generation.	Lily uses more visual tools (underlining, circling).
Use of Templates	Relies on high school templates, limiting creative thinking.	Uses a "general-specific-general " format, adhering to a strict outline.	Both follow structured formats.	Pearl's approach is more rigidly influenced by past education.

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During writing, both Pearl and Lily used similar drafting and rehearsing techniques but differed in flexibility. Pearl translated ideas while drafting and practiced "talk-writing" for refinement, showing a more iterative approach. Lily rigidly followed her outline, translating ideas step-by-step for coherence. Both rehearsed aloud, but Pearl focused on vocabulary and sentence refinement, while Lily emphasized alignment with her outline. In transcription, Pearl frequently paused for grammar and word choice corrections, slowing progress, whereas Lily corrected minor errors steadily but overlooked deeper revisions. Pearl's approach was reflective, while Lily's was more linear and driven by efficiency. For instance, Pearl practiced spelling words like "measures" and revised phrases such as "a concern thing" to "a concern." Lily, on the other hand, tested sentences such as "AI can help save time" in both Chinese and English before finalizing her sentence structures. Table 5 outlines the similarities and differences between the two participants' writing stages, highlighting key themes such as drafting, rehearsing, transcribing, and challenges related to translation.

Table 5: Comparison of Participants' Writing Stage

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Drafting	Translates Chinese concepts into English, practices "talk-writing" to refine thoughts.	Adheres to her outline strictly, translating ideas step-by-step from Chinese to English.	Both use translation as part of drafting.	Lily follows her outline more strictly than Pearl.
Rehearsing	Repeats phrases aloud, often rehearsing specific words to ensure accuracy.	Tests sentences in both languages, refining translation through verbal testing.	Both rehearse verbally before writing.	Lily focuses on testing sentence structures.
Transcribing	Frequently adjusts grammar and vocabulary, showing self-correction.	Struggles with grammar and spelling due to direct translation, corrects minor mistakes on the go.	Both engage in self-correction while writing.	Pearl sometimes overthinks, leading to slower progress.
Translation Challenges	Balances literal translation with authentic expression, often resulting in fragmented thinking.	Translates ideas directly, sometimes resulting in awkward phrases and grammar errors.	Both struggle with translation challenges.	Pearl's translation process is more iterative and hesitant.

In the reviewing stage, both Pearl and Lily engaged in evaluation and revision but differed in focus. Pearl enriched her content by refining sentences and exploring alternative expressions, showing a dynamic and adaptive revision style. Lily, by contrast, compared her draft to her outline, translating sentences back into Chinese to ensure consistency, focusing mainly on structural alignment. Pearl made deeper changes to vocabulary, structure, and coherence, while Lily's revisions were more surface-level, adjusting phrases and adding minor details. This reflects Pearl's flexibility and content exploration versus Lily's outline-driven,

constrained revisions. For example, Pearl revised the sentence "the environmental trouble has become more and more worse" to "the environmental problem has become more and more serious," demonstrating a focus on linguistic refinement. Lily, meanwhile, translated sentences back into Chinese to ensure that they matched her intended meaning, emphasizing structural coherence over linguistic nuance. Table 6 outlines the similarities and differences in the two participants' reviewing stages, focusing on evaluating, revising, and final review.

Table 6: Comparison of Participants' Reviewing Stage

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Evaluating	Actively evaluates work, adding details when sentences feel "empty."	Compares work with outline, translates English sentences back into Chinese to verify accuracy.	Both use self-evaluation techniques.	Pearl focuses more on content; Lily emphasizes alignment with the outline.
Revising	Engages in ongoing revisions, rethinking sentence structures and exploring alternative expressions.	Revises by adding details and modifying phrases for clarity, focuses on minor changes rather than deeper restructuring.	Both revise content during writing.	Lily's revisions are less in-depth compared to Pearl's.
Final Review	Lacks a systematic approach to the final review, often skips re-reading the entire essay.	Translates back into Chinese to verify meaning but may focus too much on structure over accuracy.	Both exhibit inconsistent final review practices.	Pearl misses a full final review, while Lily emphasizes structure over grammar.

During monitoring, both Pearl and Lily practiced active self-monitoring but with different focuses. Pearl prioritized vocabulary refinement and adjusted strategies mid-process, while Lily focused on structural coherence and meeting task requirements. Pearl's inconsistent time management and overthinking slowed her progress, whereas Lily balanced planning and execution effectively. Emotionally, Pearl coped with frustration by simplifying ideas, reflecting greater strain, while Lily managed anxiety through short breaks and a fresh mindset. Overall, Pearl's approach was more emotionally taxing and language-focused, while Lily maintained a structured, time-conscious, and emotionally balanced writing process. For instance, Pearl described feeling "painful and frustrated" when encountering language barriers and resorted to using simpler synonyms to overcome difficulties. In contrast, Lily reported that taking a short break allowed her to "refresh my thinking" and re-approach problems with a clearer mind. Table 7 presents the similarities and differences in the two participants' monitoring behaviors, emphasizing self-monitoring, theme management, and strategies for emotional coping.

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Table 7: Comparison of Participants' Monitoring

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Self-Monitoring	Regularly assesses progress, adjusts strategies, and reconsiders word choices.	Consistently monitors writing process, ensuring essay meets length requirements and aligns with the plan.	Both practice active self-monitoring.	Pearl focuses on vocabulary choices; Lily emphasizes meeting structure and length requirements.
Time Management	Displays inconsistent time management, sometimes overthinks during drafting.	Allocates significant time to planning, balancing planning and execution carefully.	Both manage their writing time.	Lily is more structured in time allocation.
Emotional Coping	Feels frustration and fatigue, uses substitution and simplification as coping strategies.	Manages anxiety by taking breaks and re-approaching problems with fresh perspective.	Both manage emotional challenges.	Pearl often feels frustrated, while Lily uses short breaks to reduce anxiety.

In summary, both Pearl and Lily followed a structured four-phase writing process characterized by planning, drafting, reviewing, and monitoring. While they exhibited similar strategies, including bilingual thinking, verbal rehearsal, and self-monitoring, key differences emerged in their approaches. Pearl demonstrated greater flexibility in modifying ideas, engaged in deeper revisions, and focused on vocabulary refinement, while Lily adhered more strictly to her initial outline, maintained structural consistency, and emphasized meeting task requirements. These differences underscore the need for tailored instructional approaches that encourage adaptability in planning, deeper content revisions, and effective coping strategies to enhance writing performance among EFL learners. Table 8 provides a brief summary of the participants' writing processes.

Table 8: Summary of Participants' Writing Processes

Aspect	Similarities	Differences
Planning	Both use structured planning and bilingual thinking.	Pearl relies more on translation; Lily uses more visual tools.
Writing	Both translate ideas from Chinese to English and rehearse aloud.	Pearl's process is more iterative; Lily adheres more strictly to her outline.
Reviewing	Both engage in self-evaluation and revision.	Pearl's revisions are deeper, but she lacks a full final review, while Lily focuses on structure over grammar.
Monitoring	Both actively monitor their writing and manage emotional challenges.	Pearl experiences more frustration; Lily uses proactive relaxation strategies.

Writing Strategies Used

The analysis of Pearl and Lily's writing strategies was conducted using a structured framework, encompassing goal-setting, planning, drafting, rehearsing, problem-solving, transcribing, reviewing, revising, and monitoring. While both participants employed a variety of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, notable differences emerged in the ways they approached and executed these strategies.

In goal-setting, both Pearl and Lily established clear objectives and identified key arguments. Pearl translated essay topics into Chinese for better comprehension, while Lily underlined key terms to maintain thematic focus. During planning, both used bilingual thinking to generate ideas and create outlines. Pearl drafted outlines in both languages, allowing flexibility during drafting, whereas Lily strictly followed a "general-specific-general" structure, using visual tools for organization. While both showed structured planning, Pearl's approach was more adaptable and dynamic, whereas Lily's strict adherence to her initial structure limited flexibility. For instance, Pearl translated the topic "The Role of Artificial Intelligence in Modern Society" into Chinese and used this translation to refine her outline. Lily, meanwhile, underlined key phrases such as "importance of AI" to ensure that her essay remained focused on the core theme. Table 9 presents the similarities and differences in the two participants' use of goal-setting strategies in writing.

Table 9: Comparison of Participants' Goal-setting Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Goal-setting	Translates essay topics into Chinese, sets clear goals, and aligns content with essay structure.	Clarifies objectives by underlining key terms and maintaining focus on the central theme.	Both set structured goals for writing.	Pearl uses translation for comprehension; Lily uses visual cues.

In idea generation (see Table 10), both Pearl and Lily used structured guidelines like "Firstly" and "Secondly" to ensure logical flow. Pearl relied on pre-learned templates and often used verbal fillers, reflecting her tendency to think aloud, while Lily maintained a more structured, linear approach. Both used verbalization techniques to refine ideas: Pearl rehearsed phrases to build vocabulary confidence, whereas Lily tested sentences in both Chinese and English to ensure coherence and alignment with her outline. Though similar in strategy, Pearl focused more on vocabulary reinforcement, while Lily prioritized structural consistency. For example, Pearl frequently rehearsed the phrase "pay more attention" aloud to reinforce her confidence in its accuracy, while Lily tested the sentence "AI can help save time" in both languages to confirm structural correctness.

Table 10: Comparison of Participants' Idea Generation Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference

Planning	Drafts outlines in both Chinese and English, flexible with changes during writing.	Uses a bilingual approach, visual cues like underlining, and a structured "general-specific-general" format.	Both use outlines and bilingual thinking.	Pearl is more adaptable; Lily uses more structured visual tools.
Flexibility	Allows ideas to evolve, changes plans as needed.	Follows the outline strictly, less flexible in idea generation.	Both set clear plans but with different flexibility.	Lily adheres closely to the outline; Pearl adapts during writing.

During drafting, both Pearl and Lily used outlines but differed in flexibility. Pearl's outlines were adaptable, allowing dynamic idea changes, while Lily strictly followed her plan for structural consistency. Both used note-taking: Pearl mixed Chinese and English to aid translation and idea generation, while Lily jotted key points and expanded them sequentially. For content organization, both used transitional phrases for coherence; Pearl favored words like "Firstly" and "Secondly," while Lily expanded short phrases into full sentences. Pearl's approach offered adaptability, whereas Lily's method ensured a more linear and consistent draft. For example, Pearl's initial outline for an essay on environmental protection included phrases like "firstly, raise awareness" and "secondly, implement laws," which she later adjusted to include more detailed explanations. Lily, however, maintained her original plan, expanding phrases such as "AI is valuable" into full sentences without deviating from her initial structure. Table 11 shows how the two participants used drafting strategies when writing expository essays.

Table 11: Comparison of Participants' Drafting Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Using Guidelines	Employs pre-learned templates like "Firstly," "Secondly," and "In addition" for logical flow.	Relies on structured methods such as "firstly," "secondly," "besides" to maintain argument logic.	Both use structured guidelines for idea generation.	Pearl uses more verbal fillers ("um," "er"); Lily uses consistent transitions.
Verbalizing	Practices phrases aloud to refine clarity and accuracy.	Tests sentences aloud in both languages before writing them down.	Both verbalize ideas for clarity.	Pearl often repeats phrases for confidence; Lily uses verbalization to test structure.

Rehearsing played a crucial role in both participants' writing processes, with a focus on sentence and phrase rehearsal to ensure linguistic accuracy. Pearl repeatedly practiced key sentences and phrases aloud to refine clarity and build confidence in her vocabulary choices. Lily, similarly, practiced sentences aloud in both languages to test their structural coherence before committing them to paper. While both participants

engaged in verbal rehearsal, Pearl's focus on repetition reflected her desire to build confidence in language use, whereas Lily's emphasis on structural coherence underscored her commitment to maintaining alignment with her initial plan. Additionally, both participants addressed spelling challenges by practicing difficult words. Pearl focused on practicing words such as "measures" and "harmony" to improve spelling accuracy, while Lily repeatedly wrote challenging words like "necessary" to reinforce correct spelling. This emphasis on spelling rehearsal highlights both participants' awareness of the importance of linguistic accuracy in their written work. Table 12 illustrates how the participants employed the rehearsing strategy to manage outlining, note-taking, and content organization.

Table 12: Comparison of Participants Rehearsing Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Outlining	Creates flexible outlines, uses bilingual notes to guide writing.	Drafts key concepts and uses a step-by-step approach to maintain clarity.	Both create outlines to guide their essays.	Pearl's outlines are more adaptable; Lily uses outlines to ensure strict structure.
Note-Taking	Mixes Chinese and English in drafts to facilitate translation.	Uses draft paper to jot down key points and maintain logical flow.	Both use note-taking to support drafting.	Pearl uses bilingual notes; Lily uses visual notes.
Organizing Content	Maintains a logical flow using transitional phrases, adapts content to improve coherence.	Expands short phrases into full sentences, ensuring arguments align with the outline.	Both organize content logically.	Pearl often reorders ideas; Lily follows a set order.

When facing challenges, both Pearl and Lily used problem-solving strategies. Pearl simplified complex ideas through synonyms and paraphrasing to maintain fluency, while Lily reduced sentence complexity to handle vocabulary limitations and preserve structural consistency. Both also used models: Pearl adapted pre-learned patterns flexibly to fit her needs, whereas Lily consistently applied familiar templates like "First, Second, Besides" to build coherence. Although both effectively used these strategies, Pearl's approach was more adaptive and dynamic, while Lily's focused on consistency and adherence to established structures. For instance, Pearl adapted a pre-learned model to transform the phrase "protecting the environment is important" into a more detailed statement about policy implementation, while Lily maintained the original structure of her template to present a logical argument. Table 13 illustrates how the participants used problem-solving and reduction strategies, including sentence rehearsing, spelling rehearsing, reduction, and model use.

Table 13: Comparison of Participants Problem-solving Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Sentence Rehearsing	Repeats sentences and phrases aloud to improve clarity.	Practices sentences aloud to ensure accuracy and natural expression.	Both rehearse verbally to refine ideas.	Pearl focuses on repetition; Lily tests for structure.
Spelling Rehearsing	Practices difficult words such as "measures" and "harmony."	Repeatedly writes challenging words like “necessary” to avoid spelling errors.	Both address spelling challenges through rehearsal.	Pearl focuses on vocabulary; Lily practices specific spelling.
Reduction	Simplifies complex ideas into simpler terms to maintain clarity.	Uses a reduction technique when facing vocabulary challenges, prioritizes clarity.	Both simplify ideas when needed.	Pearl uses simpler synonyms; Lily adjusts sentence structure.
Using Models	Relies on pre-learned templates and models to construct sentences.	Uses familiar structures like "First, Second, Besides" to build coherent arguments.	Both use pre-learned models to aid writing.	Pearl adapts models more dynamically; Lily uses them consistently.

In the reviewing phase, both Pearl and Lily engaged in self-evaluation and revision but with different focuses. Pearl refined content by questioning point necessity and rephrasing for depth, while Lily compared her draft to her outline, translating sentences to ensure structural accuracy. Pearl’s revisions were dynamic, involving significant changes to vocabulary, structure, and coherence, whereas Lily’s were surface-level, adjusting phrases and adding minor details. Although both demonstrated commitment to self-evaluation, Pearl focused on enriching ideas, while Lily prioritized maintaining alignment with her original plan. For example, Pearl revised the sentence “the environmental trouble has become more and more worse” to “the environmental problem has become more and more serious,” demonstrating a focus on linguistic refinement. Lily, meanwhile, translated sentences back into Chinese to ensure they matched her intended meaning, emphasizing structural alignment over content depth. Table 14 illustrates how the participants employed reviewing and revising strategies during expository essay writing.

Table 14: Comparison of Participants Reviewing and Revising Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Evaluating	Questions necessity of points, rephrases unclear sentences.	Compares work with outline, translates sentences back to Chinese to check accuracy.	Both evaluate their work during writing.	Pearl evaluates content depth; Lily checks structural alignment.
Revising	Engages in adaptive revisions, making changes to vocabulary and sentence structure.	Revises content by adding details, often focusing on minor changes rather than deeper restructuring.	Both revise content for clarity.	Pearl's revisions are deeper; Lily focuses on word choice.

Both participants demonstrated active self-monitoring, but with different focuses. Pearl regularly assessed vocabulary choices and adjusted strategies for coherence, while Lily ensured her writing met length requirements and aligned with her outline. Emotionally, Pearl coped with frustration by simplifying ideas to manage cognitive load, reflecting greater strain. In contrast, Lily took short breaks to refresh and re-approach challenges, helping her maintain composure and focus. While both used effective coping strategies, Pearl's approach centered on language refinement under emotional pressure, whereas Lily prioritized structure and emotional balance. For instance, Pearl described feeling "painful and frustrated" when encountering language barriers and resorted to using simpler synonyms to overcome difficulties. Lily, however, managed her anxiety by taking short breaks, stating that this technique allowed her to "refresh her thinking" and re-approach problems with greater clarity. Table 15 presents how the participants monitored their writing processes and managed emotional stress.

Table 15: Comparison of Participants Monitoring Strategy Use

Theme	Pearl	Lily	Similarity	Difference
Self-Monitoring	Tracks progress, adapts strategies, and manages vocabulary retrieval.	Monitors writing process, ensuring essay meets length and structure requirements.	Both monitor progress and adjust strategies.	Pearl manages cognitive load; Lily balances planning and execution.
Emotional Management	Takes short pauses when fatigued, uses simple language to cope with stress.	Uses short breaks to manage anxiety and re-approach problems with a fresh perspective.	Both use breaks to manage writing anxiety.	Pearl substitutes simpler language; Lily re-evaluates with a fresh perspective.

Discussion

This study explored the expository essay writing processes and strategies of two Chinese EFL non-English major students, Pearl and Lily. Through a detailed analysis of their writing behaviors, it was found that both participants engaged in a four-phase recursive writing process—planning, drafting, reviewing, and monitoring—consistent with Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive composing model. However, individual differences in their strategy use revealed varying levels of effectiveness.

Both Pearl and Lily established structured plans before writing, reflecting Wenden's (1991) identification of goal-setting as a key metacognitive strategy. Pearl frequently translated essay topics into Chinese to enhance her understanding, a practice recognized by Arndt (1987) as useful for scaffolding comprehension. However, Pearl's heavy reliance on her first language (L1) often slowed idea generation and diminished her fluency in the second language (L2), a drawback cautioned by Victori (1995). In contrast,

Lily underlined key English terms and visually mapped her ideas, demonstrating stronger autonomous cognitive engagement, consistent with Williams' (2003) Phase Model. Her planning approach helped her maintain thematic focus and coherence throughout her writing. Overall, Lily's strategy of visual mapping and direct engagement with the L2 proved more effective for producing coherent essays than Pearl's translation-heavy method.

During the drafting stage, both participants employed verbal rehearsal—repeating sentences aloud—a strategy shown by Arndt (1987) and Abdel Latif (2021) to enhance linguistic accuracy. Pearl's flexible "talk-writing" approach encouraged deeper reflection but often led to fragmented drafting and inefficiency, echoing Kellogg's (1996) findings on the effects of working memory overload. In contrast, Lily's strict adherence to her outline fostered greater coherence and fluency, though it constrained the development of new ideas, aligning with Chien's (2012) observation that rigid outlines can limit creativity. Thus, while Lily's structured drafting process enhanced fluency and coherence, Pearl's more flexible method promoted content richness, albeit at the cost of drafting efficiency.

In the revision process, Pearl engaged in dynamic, global revisions, frequently restructuring sentences and enriching content—behaviors characteristic of proficient writers, as noted by Victori (1995). Conversely, Lily focused primarily on surface-level corrections, such as grammar and word choice, consistent with Xu and Qi's (2017) findings on exam-oriented revision practices among Chinese EFL learners. Pearl's deep revision strategies proved more effective for enhancing content depth, whereas Lily's surface-level revisions, while maintaining structural consistency, limited opportunities for deeper content development.

Both participants also employed self-monitoring strategies, a core component of effective writing identified by Wenden (1991) and Abdel Latif (2021). Pearl actively monitored her vocabulary choices but often experienced emotional frustration, leading her to simplify her language under stress—a coping behavior aligned with Guo and Huang's (2020) findings. In contrast, Lily demonstrated stronger emotional regulation by taking short cognitive breaks to enhance focus and maintain steady progress, a technique recommended by Xu (2018). Consequently, Lily's emotional management strategies were more effective in sustaining writing quality and coherence, whereas Pearl's emotional struggles occasionally compromised her writing fluency and depth.

The participants' strategic behaviors revealed distinct profiles in terms of overall effectiveness. Pearl demonstrated notable strengths in flexible idea generation, dynamic revisions, and content enrichment. Her ability to generate ideas freely and revise extensively contributed to richer essay content. However, these strengths were offset by weaknesses in time management, fragmented drafting, and emotional strain, which sometimes disrupted her writing fluency and organization. Thus, Pearl's writing process was moderately

effective: although she excelled at enriching ideas and adding depth to her essays, her performance was limited by emotional and organizational challenges.

In contrast, Lily exhibited strengths in maintaining structural coherence, managing time efficiently, and exercising strong emotional control. Her strict adherence to planned outlines enabled her to produce essays that were coherent and well-organized, and her ability to regulate emotions through short cognitive breaks helped her sustain focus and quality throughout the writing process. Nevertheless, Lily's rigid structuring sometimes restricted her creativity and limited the depth of content development. Overall, Lily's writing approach proved highly effective for producing coherent and efficient essays, even though it slightly constrained the expansion and flexibility of her ideas.

The findings confirm that effective writing strategy use requires a balance between clear planning, dynamic revision, emotional regulation, and systematic monitoring. Neither complete rigidity nor unrestricted flexibility alone ensures writing success. Pearl's case highlights the benefits of adaptability and deep revision, but also underscores the necessity of stronger emotional regulation and more efficient time management. Lily's case exemplifies the advantages of structure, disciplined planning, and emotional resilience, though occasionally at the expense of creativity. Overall, both participants' experiences corroborate the theoretical insights of Flower and Hayes (1981), Wenden (1991), and Abdel Latif (2021), emphasizing that successful L2 writing depends not only on cognitive and linguistic strategies but also on robust self-regulation and effective emotional management.

Implications

The findings underscore the pedagogical need to integrate metacognitive strategy instruction into EFL writing curricula. Explicit training in goal-setting, self-monitoring, and reflective evaluation can enhance students' ability to regulate their writing independently. Teachers should embed these strategies within writing tasks to develop learners' awareness of their thinking and planning across composition stages. The recursive and non-linear nature of writing observed suggests that instruction should move beyond rigid product-based models, promoting flexible processes involving continual planning, drafting, and revision. This approach helps learners build confidence and engage in deeper, more meaningful revisions. The use of bilingual thinking and code-switching during idea generation highlights the value of scaffolding the L1 strategically to support L2 output while guiding students toward greater fluency.

Affective factors such as frustration, anxiety, and fatigue significantly impacted performance, pointing to the importance of emotional coping strategies like mindfulness, time management, and cognitive breaks. Incorporating technological tools—such as AI-powered writing assistants, grammar checkers, and peer review platforms—can further support learners by offering real-time feedback and fostering independence.

Finally, the contrast between the two participants emphasizes the importance of individualized instruction. Recognizing learners' diverse strategic preferences and emotional dispositions, educators should provide differentiated scaffolding, varied writing models, and personalized feedback. Such an approach enables students to build on their strengths while addressing areas for growth, ultimately fostering more effective and confident EFL writers.

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of understanding individual variation in EFL learners' expository essay writing processes and strategies. While both participants engaged in recursive writing stages—planning, drafting, reviewing, and monitoring—their distinct approaches reveal that effective writing development is not uniform but shaped by personal habits, emotional responses, and strategic preferences. Pearl demonstrated flexibility and deeper content engagement but struggled with emotional regulation and time management, whereas Lily excelled in structural coherence and self-regulation, albeit with limited creative expansion. These findings suggest that effective writing pedagogy must go beyond formulaic instruction, incorporating process-oriented, strategy-based, and emotionally supportive frameworks.

The study contributes to the ongoing development of writing models by offering insights into how non-English majors manage the cognitive and affective demands of L2 writing. Pedagogically, it calls for an emphasis on metacognitive training, emotional support, and technological integration to scaffold learners' development. Future research should examine broader participant samples and longitudinal impacts of tailored instructional interventions, as well as the cultural-linguistic dynamics that influence strategy use. Ultimately, fostering adaptable, reflective, and emotionally resilient writers requires a comprehensive and student-centered approach to writing instruction.

Author Contributions

Conghui Wang led the data collection, transcription, and initial analysis of the participants' writing processes and strategies. Aini Akmar Mohd Kasim supervised the research design, provided methodological guidance, and contributed to the interpretation of findings. Noor Hanim Rahmat assisted in refining the conceptual framework, validating the qualitative coding, and reviewing the manuscript structure and coherence. All authors contributed to the writing and critical revision of the final manuscript and approved the submitted version.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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An Analysis of Interactional Metadiscourse Markers in Expository Writing by Malaysian ESL Undergraduates

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Abstract

Research on metadiscourse has explored various genres, such as research articles and theses, often using Hyland's Interpersonal Metadiscourse model. However, findings vary due to differences in genre and educational level, such as undergraduate versus postgraduate. Expository writing, especially in Malaysia, has received less attention in recent years. This study examines interactional metadiscourse in expository essays by Malaysian ESL students, focusing on how markers enhance clarity and conciseness based on Hyland's Interpersonal Metadiscourse framework. Interactional metadiscourse markers are the main focus in this study because they assist readers in understanding the propositional contents clearly. A corpus of 206 essays, approximately 83,445 words, was analysed quantitatively using Text Inspector and qualitatively to ensure reliability. Results showed minor discrepancies among the five interactional metadiscourse types, as students used them unconsciously without strong preferences. Notably, self-mention markers like "we" and "our" were overused, suggesting a misunderstanding of academic tone and reliance on personal opinions over evidence. The second highest frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers is boosters, followed by engagement markers, hedges, and attitude markers. These findings highlight the need for explicit instruction on metadiscourse in academic writing courses. Teaching students the rhetorical functions of these markers can improve discourse awareness, audience engagement, and adherence to conventions. These findings suggest ESL curricula should prioritise explicit instruction on metadiscourse in Malaysian ESL writing curricula to enhance students' rhetorical awareness, audience engagement, and academic writing competence.

Keywords: *applied linguistics, expository writing, genre analysis, interactional markers, metadiscourse*

Introduction

In academic writing, particularly expository essays, clarity and reader engagement are essential. One of the tools writers use to achieve these goals is metadiscourse, a language tool that signals the writer's presence, guides the reader through the text, and helps shape how information is understood. Metadiscourse can be broadly categorised into two types which are interactive and interactional. While interactive metadiscourse helps organise content and structure ideas through the use of markers such as transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials and code glosses, interactional metadiscourse reflects the stance of a writer and engages the reader by expressing attitudes, judgments, and evaluations (Hyland, 2005). Interactional

markers include features such as hedges (e.g., *perhaps*), boosters (e.g., *clearly*), attitude markers (e.g., *unfortunately*), self-mentions (e.g., *I argue*), and engagement markers (e.g., *consider*).

For learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), mastering interactional metadiscourse is a critical yet often overlooked aspect of writing development. These markers enable writers not only to present information but also to interact with their readers, aligning themselves with academic discourse conventions (El-Dakhs et al., 2022). However, ESL learners may struggle with using such features effectively due to limited exposure to native writing models or instruction that prioritizes grammar and content over discourse-level strategies (Perez Penup, 2020).

In Malaysia, English plays a significant role as a second language in education, and many university students are required to produce academic writing in English. Yet, local researchers such as Che Mat (2020), Hamdan and Ahmad (2023), and Mat Zali et al. (2022) suggest that Malaysian ESL undergraduates often face challenges in engaging their readers and expressing authorial stance in writing. Given the importance of interactional metadiscourse for academic success, it is essential to examine how these students use such linguistic resources in their essays, particularly in a formal and structured genre like expository writing.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of interactional metadiscourse markers are used by Malaysian ESL undergraduates in the expository essays?
2. How frequently are these interactional metadiscourse markers used in the expository essays?
3. What do the patterns of use suggest about the students' ability to engage readers and express stance in writing?

Although previous studies have explored metadiscourse in ESL and EFL contexts, few have focused specifically on Malaysian learners' use of interactional metadiscourse markers, especially in the genre of expository writing. Most existing literature tends to concentrate on advanced learners or published academic texts, leaving a gap in our understanding of undergraduate-level writing in a Malaysian context. By understanding how Malaysian undergraduates utilise interactional metadiscourse, it can provide insights to language instructors and applied linguists into their rhetorical awareness and inform teaching practices in academic writing courses. Hence, this study aims to analyse the types and frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers in expository writing by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. It also aims to determine how much these students interact with their audience and present themselves as writers. The results will advance knowledge of academic writing in ESL classes and could influence instructional approaches to raise students' awareness of metadiscourse in the classroom. Therefore, to contextualise the present study and clarify its theoretical foundation, it is essential to examine prior research on interactional metadiscourse markers and their role in ESL academic writing.

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Literature Review

Researchers have been looking This section reviews relevant literature on interactional metadiscourse markers, with a particular focus on ESL and EFL academic contexts, to highlight gaps and guide the current analysis. Metadiscourse refers to the linguistic resources writers use to organise their texts, engage readers, and express stance (Deng et al., 2025). It represents how writers project themselves into their writing and communicate directly with readers, beyond simply delivering information (Hyland, 2005). In academic writing, metadiscourse plays a key role in constructing a coherent, reader-friendly, and persuasive argument. It enables writers to guide readers through their arguments and to signal how ideas should be understood.

Hyland (2005) proposes a widely accepted model of metadiscourse that distinguishes between two main categories: interactive and interactional. Interactive metadiscourse helps organise the propositional content of the text, while interactional metadiscourse reflects the writer's awareness of the reader and helps to engage them in the argument. However, this study focuses specifically on the interactional dimension only.

Numerous studies have investigated the use of metadiscourse in second and foreign language writing (Chung et al., 2023). Chung et al. (2023) claimed that many students lacked the metadiscursive flexibility required to adapt their interactional strategies to genre and audience expectations. In relation to metadiscursive flexibility, other researchers such as Alqahtani (2024), Lee (2020), and Yoon and Kim (2022) generally show that ESL or EFL learners tend to underuse or misuse interactional markers compared to native English writers. Consequently, this may result in writing that appears overly factual, impersonal, or lacking in rhetorical engagement.

As demonstrated by Hyland and Jiang (2016), L2 academic writers use fewer hedges and boosters, leading to a less nuanced expression of stance. Similarly, Fu and Hyland (2014) reported that Chinese EFL learners struggled with using engagement markers, which affected their ability to connect with the reader. These findings suggest that interactional metadiscourse competence is closely linked to rhetorical awareness and pragmatic sensitivity, which may be underdeveloped in ESL learners due to differences in language proficiency, cultural expectations, and writing instruction.

In the Malaysian context, several studies have explored features of academic writing among ESL undergraduates. For example, Mat Zali et al. (2024) noted that Malaysian students, regardless of whether they are from the fields of hard science or soft science, often focus heavily on content and grammar, with limited attention to rhetorical features such as metadiscourse. Similarly, Rahmat et al. (2020) analysed argumentative essays and found that interactional markers were used inconsistently and often inaccurately by inbound students from Thailand.

Despite these efforts, there remains a lack of focused research on how Malaysian undergraduates use interactional metadiscourse in specific academic genres like the expository essay. Much of the existing work, such as El-Dakhs (2020), Mat Zali et al. (2024), and Zakaria and Abdul Malik (2018), either analyses general language proficiency or combines interactional and interactive markers without a deeper look into their individual functions. Across these three previous researchers, ESL and EFL learners have shown limited yet evolving awareness of interactional metadiscourse markers, though their usage often lacks rhetorical control and genre sensitivity. El-Dakhs (2020) found that Saudi university students overused engagement markers such as “you” and “should”, with minimal use of self-mentions and hedges, resulting in writing that was overly forceful and lacking nuance, partly due to L1 interference and insufficient instruction. Similarly, Zakaria and Abdul Malik (2018) observed Malaysian undergraduates employing interactional features inconsistently, often relying on formulaic expressions that compromised academic tone and persuasive strength. In both studies, the infrequent use of self-mentions suggested a reluctance or lack of training in projecting authorial voice. Meanwhile, Mat Zali et al. (2024) identified more strategic use of interactional markers among high-proficiency Malaysian ESL learners, especially in their application of hedges and self-mentions to convey stance and build reader rapport. However, even among proficient writers, challenges remained in maintaining rhetorical appropriateness and avoiding overuse of engagement markers. These findings have collectively highlighted a shared need for explicit, genre-based instruction on how to deploy interactional metadiscourse to enhance clarity, persuasion, and audience awareness in academic writing.

The literature reveals that while the importance of metadiscourse in academic writing is well established, there is limited research that specifically examines how Malaysian ESL undergraduates employ interactional metadiscourse markers in expository writing. Most prior studies have focused either on general writing skills (AbdelWahab, 2020; Akinseye, 2023; Liao, 2020; Yoon & Kim, 2022) or on argumentative writing (Kacimi & Messekher, 2024; Khamkhien, 2025; Umirzakova et al., 2023), leaving expository genres underexplored. Furthermore, there is a need for more corpus-based analyses of actual student texts to identify patterns and areas for pedagogical intervention. Therefore, this study seeks to close the gap by offering a systematic examination of interactional metadiscourse markers in Malaysian ESL learners' expository essays. The findings are expected to contribute to a better understanding of students’ rhetorical competence and inform instructional strategies in academic writing programs.

Theoretical Framework

Interactional metadiscourse includes several subcategories, each serving a specific function in facilitating writer-reader interaction (refer to Diagram 1). These markers are crucial in shaping how readers interpret

and respond to an argument proposed by the writer for the consideration among readers. They contribute to building a credible and persuasive authorial voice, which is especially important in academic genres such as expository writing.

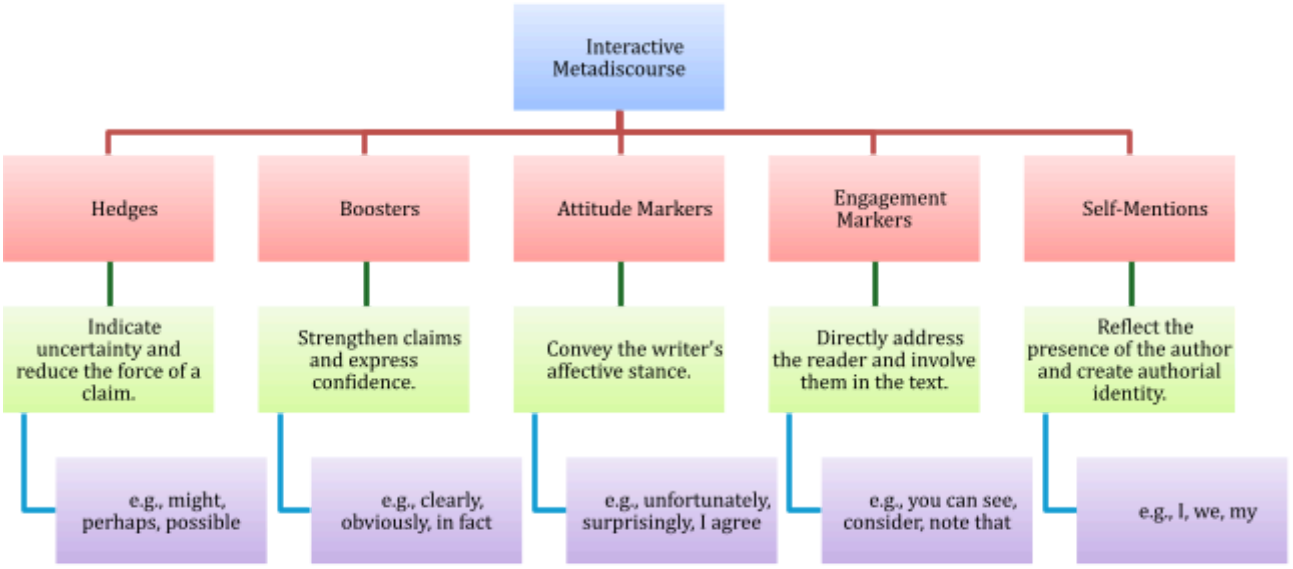

Diagram 1: The interactional metadiscourse markers adopted from Hyland's (2005) Interpersonal Model of Metadiscourse

Diagram 1 visually represents how interactional metadiscourse markers function in expository writing to enhance communication between writer and reader. Adapted from Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model, the diagram is structured around two core components, which are the writer's stance and reader engagement. The diagram branches into five categories of interactional metadiscourse markers that reflect how writers engage with readers in academic writing. Hedges signal the writer's caution or tentativeness, allowing space for alternative interpretations (e.g., "might", "perhaps"), while boosters convey certainty and confidence to reinforce arguments (e.g., "clearly", "indeed"). Attitude markers express the writer's affective stance or personal evaluation of the information presented (e.g., "unfortunately", "surprisingly"). Self-mentions such as "I argue" or "we suggest" reveal the writer's presence and identity within the text, asserting ownership of the claims. Lastly, engagement markers like "as you can see" or "note that" directly involve the reader, fostering a dialogic relationship between writer and audience. Each category is connected to rhetorical goals, either projecting authorial presence, showing commitment, or acknowledging the

audience. The diagram illustrates how these markers operate not just as surface-level expressions, but as tools that position the writer in relation to the reader and content.

Hence, when interactional metadiscourse markers are applied in expository writing, the essay can communicate effectively to the readers. This is because the primary aim of expository writing is to inform, explain, or clarify a topic. However, effective communication goes beyond presenting facts as it involves managing the writer-reader relationship. This is where interactional metadiscourse markers become crucial. By using hedges, writers show intellectual humility and openness to other interpretations, which enhances credibility. Boosters, in turn, signal confidence and help underscore key points, guiding the reader's perception of importance. Attitude markers inject evaluative tone, subtly influencing how readers interpret information. Self-mentions reinforce authorial control and argument ownership, especially in persuasive or analytical sections. Finally, engagement markers invite the reader into the discussion, making the text feel more interactive and accessible. Together, these markers transform expository writing from a one-sided expository writing into a reader-aware and rhetorically sophisticated discourse. They help writers balance authority with approachability, ensuring that ideas are not just presented, but also received and understood with clarity and relevance.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative textual analysis with descriptive statistics based on the previous study done by Zakaria and Abdul Malik (2018) to analyse the use of interactional metadiscourse markers in expository essays written by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. The design is exploratory in nature and aims to identify the types, frequency, and patterns of interactional metadiscourse usage based on Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model.

Participants

The participants consisted of 54 Malaysian undergraduate students enrolled in an English proficiency course at a public university in Malaysia. There were 14 male and 40 female participants involved in this study, aged between 20 to 23 years old. The students were selected through purposive sampling based on their availability and willingness to provide written essays for research purposes. The students are enrolled in two different faculties, namely the Faculty of Business Management and the Faculty of Plantation and Agrotechnology. Their language proficiency levels were determined from their previous Malaysian Certificate of Education, also known as Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM).

Prior to writing the four types of expository essays, they had completed academic writing instruction for the semester, during which the data was collected. Each student was asked to write four types of expository essays. Three types of essays were written in untimed conditions, while one type of essay was written in timed conditions. The three types of essays that were written more freely as part of coursework assignments are topical, cause-effect, and problem-solution essays. There was also one expository essay that was composed within a two-hour time frame during formal tests. This mix of writing conditions allowed the researchers to capture a more authentic range of student writing behaviours, both in more reflective, prepared settings and under exam pressure.

Data Collection

The data comprised 206 expository essays, each between 400 to 600 words. Three types of expository essays, which are topical, cause-effect, and problem-solution, were written in response to the various prompts, where the students select the writing topic based on their personal preference during a classroom-based writing assessment. There is also an expository essay that they have written as their writing assessment under the time constraint of two hours. These prompts required students to present their views on a contemporary social issue (e.g., the benefits of student engagement in creative activities like are and music), allowing for the natural use of stance and reader engagement. Essays were collected with consent from students and were anonymised for confidentiality.

Analytical Framework

The essays were first transcribed into digital format and processed using Text Inspector and Microsoft Word to prepare the text for analysis. Text Inspector is a well-known text evaluation tool for English and is designed to evaluate non-native speakers' writing (Rysova et al., 2019; Yoon & Kim, 2022). The tool provides a statistical analysis of the text by calculating the number of words, syllables, sentences, average text length, relative frequency, and metadiscourse markers. This tool complements the manual coding by assisting the Text Inspector users when they provide some input, a software called Analyst checks every example of coding in the context, and it can alter or exclude the coding if misclassification of an item has been made (Bax et al., 2019).

Each essay was then carefully read and manually coded for instances of five interactional metadiscourse categories. This coding was carried out by the researcher and verified by a second rater who had been trained in discourse analysis, ensuring the reliability of the data. After coding, the frequency of each type of marker was counted, and descriptive statistics, such as frequency and percentage, were calculated to identify usage trends. Finally, a qualitative analysis, specifically content analysis, was conducted by identifying and quantifying specific features within the text, such as the frequency of

engagement markers or the repeated use of expressions like "I believe". This method is particularly effective because it is systematic, replicable, and capable of producing quantifiable data that can be used to identify patterns or trends (Krippendorff, 2018; Schreier, 2012). It allows researchers to code textual elements into meaningful categories, making it especially useful for large datasets. Furthermore, content analysis is often employed as a preliminary step before conducting more interpretive analyses such as discourse or thematic analysis, as it provides a foundational overview of what appears in the text, how frequently it occurs, and how these elements are distributed across the dataset (Neuendorf, 2017; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

Trustworthiness and Reliability

To ensure reliability, inter-rater agreement was calculated using a subset of 50 essays, achieving a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.82, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. Member checking and peer debriefing were also employed to enhance credibility.

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the university's ethics committee. All participants provided informed consent, and their identities were protected by assigning anonymous codes to each essay.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal important insights into the use of interactional metadiscourse markers in expository writing by Malaysian ESL undergraduates. This section discusses the implications of the patterns identified in relation to each research question and connects the results to previous literature and theoretical frameworks.

Table 1: The usage of interactional metadiscourse markers in the corpus

Interactional	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Self-mentions	898	28.35
Boosters	650	20.52
Engagement markers	631	19.92
Hedges	572	18.06
Attitude markers	417	13.16
Total	3168	100

Table 1 indicates the interactional metadiscourse markers used by Malaysian ESL undergraduates in expository writing. The most frequently used metadiscourse marker category is self-mentions (28.35%), whereas students use attitude markers the least (13.16%). These five types of interactional metadiscourse

markers are not very different from interactive markers, which show a big difference between transitions and endophoric markers. It is evident from comparing the frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers with the interactive ones that students will utilise transition markers more frequently than the other four types of interactional metadiscourse markers when they are more accustomed to them. However, when it comes to interactional metadiscourse markers, students tend to use them unconsciously, which means they do not have a strong preference for any particular type. Pearson and Abdollahzadeh (2023) addressed this in their systematic literature review, highlighting the identification and retrieval of metadiscourse markers as a noteworthy area for future research design and reporting. Apart from focusing on audience awareness (Fang & Zhuang, 2022), identification and retrieval of metadiscourse markers can be understood as a writer's awareness in using metadiscourse (Chung et al., 2023). Interactional metadiscourse markers demonstrate the writer's awareness of their readers and the necessity to clarify, elaborate, interact with, and guide them through the use of language. Management of interactional metadiscourse markers enables the writer to convey their affective position towards the content and reader, build writer-reader rapport, and eventually construct a text that is considered persuasive or successful (Lee & Deakin, 2016; as cited in Chung et al., 2023).

Self-mentions

Table 2: The use of self-mentions in the corpus

Self-mentions	Frequency	Percentage (%)
We	900	55.01
Our	714	43.64
I	19	1.16
My	3	0.18
Total	1636	100

Among the four types of self-mention markers used in expository writing, as shown in Table 2, "we" (900 items) and "our" (714 items) are the most common self-mentions used by the students. The least common frame markers used by the students are "I" (19 items) and "my" (3 items). The findings from this study show that students have the intention to convey authorial identity and engage with readers at the same time, and it can be achieved by using self-mentions explicitly (Hyland & Paltridge, 2011; as cited in Abousaeed, 2020). The application of reader pronouns such as "you", "your", and "we" is the way for students to make explicit reference to readers to engage them by weaving potential points of view into discourse. There have been differing opinions among teacher-participants in Karakus's (2020) study, as some teachers said that students should not explicitly show their presence using "I" or "we" in their essays, while some teachers said it is

acceptable to use those pronouns as long as they do not overuse them when making themselves visible by giving personal examples. Yuksel and Kavanoz (2018) stated that novice non-native writers used more self-mentions to express their commitment to their propositional content, while expert writers refrained from making overstatements.

Apart from the intention of the authors in this study to overly use "we" and "our" for conveying authorial identity and engaging with readers, there is also a possibility that its overuse can be attributed to the misunderstanding of academic tone, which stems from collectivist norms in Malaysian society. Yoon's (2020) study supported this possibility as she found that there is a significant variation in metadiscourse use across three different backgrounds, such as Chinese, Korean, and Japanese EFL students. These norms affect how writers project authority, engage the audience, and structure argumentation through the excessive use of self-mention. In other words, if metadiscourse is the author's way of showing up on the page, then the author's culture determines whether that presence is assertive, reserved, or collectively oriented.

"I" and "we" are also frequently used by the participants in Kapranov's (2020) study. Kapranov explained that the author's goal to project a formal and trustworthy authorial voice is one of the reasons for the extensive use of "we". In this context, it should be emphasised that Hyland (2002; as cited in Kapranov, 2020) describes the self-mention "we" as an expression of the authorial presence that gives the writer a sense of authority and legitimacy by excluding the reader. The increased usage of "I" was further explained by Kapranov as a predisposition to use a more neutral and possibly more colloquial register of the English language. According to the teacher-participants in Karakus's study, Kapranov seems to agree with them when they say that the self-mention "I" seems to be a component of a less rigorous narrative that is characterised by the participants' reflections rather than a well-organised and cohesive argument. Kapranov concluded that rather than the participants' major at university, the use of self-mentions in the current corpus depends on their level of EFL competence. However, because the third-person point of view can be more impartial and persuasive, students are frequently required to avoid using the first-person point of view in academic writing, such as expository articles. Students might say, "I think the author is very convincing," for instance. Removing the "I" from the example strengthens the statement or claim, as demonstrated in this example: "The author is very convincing". Despite the common belief in academic writing, the students in this study still frequently use the first-person point of view "I" and "my". This suggests that they are more direct in their self-references and reasonably candid in sharing their opinions and participation in the essay (Nawawi & Ting, 2022).

Boosters

Table 3: The use of boosters in the corpus

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Boosters	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Should	189	28.64
Know	149	22.58
Always	64	9.70
Essential	60	9.09
Show	33	5.00
Indeed	29	4.39
Sure	19	2.88
Actually	17	2.58
Never	17	2.58
Establish	11	1.67
True	11	1.67
Even if	9	1.36
Won't	9	1.36
Definitely	7	1.06
Clearly	5	0.76
The fact that	5	0.76
Demonstrate	4	0.61
Of course	4	0.61
Prove	4	0.61
I believe	3	0.45
Certainly	2	0.30
Undoubtedly	2	0.15
Well known	2	0.30
Obvious	2	0.30
Beyond doubt	1	0.15
Determine	1	0.15
No doubt	1	0.15
Obviously	1	0.15
Total	660	100

Table 3 illustrates the analysis of the expository essay corpus in which the students have employed 28 types of boosters. The most common boosters used by the students are "should" (189 items), "know" (149 items), "always" (64 items), "essential" (60 items), and "show" (33 items). The least common boosters used by the students are the items with recorded only a single usage from the corpus, which are "beyond doubt" (1 item), "determine" (1 item), "no doubt" (1 item), "obviously" (1 item), and "undoubtedly" (2 items).

According to Hyland's (2005) six categories of metadiscoursal boosters, the most common boosters used, such as "should" can be categorised as boosting modal auxiliary; "know" can be categorised as boosting phrase; "always" can be categorised as boosting adverb; "essential" can be categorised as boosting adjective; and "show" can be categorised as boosting verb. It is evident that the students utilised a variety of boosters, often without conscious awareness of their use. The highest frequency of "should" (28.64%) used

by the students in this study suggests that they are prone to include advice, recommendations, and expectations in their expository essays. As for the boosting phrase "know" with the second highest frequency (22.58%), when it is used with the pronoun "we" or "you", it shows that the writer is having an attempt to communicate with the readers on the topic in which they assumed that the writer and reader shared a similar extent of schemata. The corpus contained 13 instances of the phrase "as we know" and only two instances of "as you know". Despite their non-dominant use in expository writing, boosters showed that writers were more inclined to convey their confidence in their arguments to a close audience. Qin and Uccelli (2019) speculate that the short time frame of the essays may have prevented the writers from seeking external evidence to bolster their arguments. Consequently, in more formal academic writing, the absence of evidence may also lead to comparatively lower "confidence or commitment" to the stated beliefs (Deng et al., 2025).

For the least common boosters used, namely "beyond doubt", can be categorised as a boosting adjective; "determine" can be categorised as a boosting verb, whereas "no doubt", "obviously", and "undoubtedly" can be categorised as boosting adverbs. The limited use of these boosters needs to be highlighted because the participants in this study might be uncomfortable boosting their propositional contents to a certain degree. Yoon (2020) discovered that the topic effect significantly impacts the metadiscourse category of boosters. This finding has practical implications, particularly when preparing writing test prompts. When stance markers are used in a prompt, test-takers may unconsciously be influenced to write their essays from a specific viewpoint, which could have a detrimental effect on their language and performance ratings (Yoon, 2020). Therefore, writing prompts to be used in high-stakes test settings should be constructed with few biased or emotional words, unless the elicitation of particular language features is intentionally planned, like facilitating the use of hedging expressions. In addition, Lo et al. (2021) presented several explanations for the variation in the boosters used by the participants in this study. People have different levels of knowledge about how boosters work in academic writing, different writing experiences, and a lack of understanding about how boosters and the writing context interact. Additionally, students lack confidence in their capacity to deliver propositional information in a second language, do not understand how to utilise boosters effectively in academic writing, and do not view boosters as a communication approach that can strengthen or weaken propositions.

Engagement markers

Table 4: The use of engagement markers in the corpus

Engagement markers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Us	294	38.38

You	258	33.68
Your	168	21.93
One's	12	1.57
Let	8	1.04
Imagine	4	0.52
Let us	4	0.52
Let's	4	0.52
Notice	4	0.52
Think about	4	0.52
Recall	3	0.39
Note (that)	2	0.26
Consider	1	0.13
Total	766	100

The Malaysian ESL undergraduates used 13 types of engagement markers in their expository writing, as shown in Table 4. The most common engagement markers used by the students are "us" (294 items), "you" (258 items), and "your" (168 items). The least common engagement markers used by the students are "let's", "let us", "notice", and "think about", which recorded four items, respectively, and a single use of "consider" based on the analysis. The findings in this study contradict Rahmat's (2011) assertion that the students in her study wrote without any consideration for their audience. The heavy use of pronouns such as "us", "you", and "your" indicates that the participants from the current study have made an attempt to communicate with their readers directly. In addition, the teacher-participants in Karakus's (2020) study reported that students often utilize "you" in their essays as a means of communication with the reader. However, initiating interactions with the reader requires skill, creativity, and smoothness, which depend on the language proficiency of the students. Furthermore, Ho and Li (2018) discovered that, in contrast to other kinds of interactional metadiscourse markers, the students in their study employed more engagement markers. The time constraint to engage with the reader and exposure to the argumentative essay model can influence a stronger preference for engagement markers, as demonstrated in their study. In line with the findings of Ho and Li, Pavlovic and Dordevic (2020) discovered that engagement markers were the most frequently used category in interactional metadiscourse, while Mohamed et al. (2021) discovered that engagement markers accounted for nearly half of all metadiscourse markers in the corpus. On top of that, ESL writers' higher usage of reader pronouns than that of native speakers (NS) can be explained by their cultural origins, which place a high importance on harmony with other community members and view overt self-projection as impolite or insulting (Yoon, 2020). Thus, it is important to note that although the use of reader pronouns by writers establishes a common ground with readers (Hyland, 2010), an overreliance on personal pronouns can still negatively impact the formality of academic writing. In addition, Erarslan (2021)

also observed that students primarily used interactional markers with engagement markers, suggesting a desire to establish a connection with their readers through their texts.

Hedges

Table 5: The use of hedges in the corpus

Hedges	Frequency	Percentage (%)
May	110	18.71
Could	91	15.48
Frequently	62	10.54
Would	57	9.69
Might	54	9.18
Often	41	6.97
Possible	25	4.25
Usually	25	4.25
Sometimes	23	3.91
Likely	18	3.06
Mostly	16	2.72
Maybe	13	2.21
Almost	10	1.70
Essentially	8	1.36
Little	8	1.36
Generally	5	0.85
Probably	5	0.85
Mainly	4	0.68
Possibly	3	0.51
In general	3	0.51
Seems	1	0.17
Apparently	1	0.17
Appear to be	1	0.17
Approximately	1	0.17
Assume	1	0.17
Doubt	1	0.17
Largely	1	0.17
Total	588	100

The Malaysian ESL undergraduates have produced 27 types of hedges in their expository essays, as demonstrated in Table 5. The most common hedges used by the students are “may” (110 items), “frequently” (62 items), “would” (57 items), “might” (54 items), “possible” (25 items), and “usually” (25 items). The least common hedges used by the students are “apparently”, “appear to be”, “approximately”, “assume”, “doubt”, “largely”, and “seems”, which were recorded one item, respectively, in the corpus. The usage of

diverse hedges can be demonstrated by combining and focusing on hedges of modal verbs; writers aim to alter their discussion of options and modify their attitudes towards the truth of claims (Ge, 2015). Carrio-Pastor (2021) validates this claim by asserting that hedges will be used more frequently the more varieties there are.

In contrast, the finding in this study produced a different outcome as compared to Pyykonen's (2023) study, as she found that "would" is preferred by students of all different proficiencies (CEFR B1, B2, C1, C2), and it is used more in opinion writing than letter writing. The writer uses "would" to highlight the extent to which they would benefit from the recipient's assistance. The highest frequency of "may" in this corpus showed that study participants were likely to express uncertainty about their expository essays. It is understandable that diploma-level authors employ "may" as a warning tactic, enabling them to "diplomatically" convey less than complete dedication to their work (Swales, 1990; as cited in Ge, 2015).

According to Bhartiya et al. (2023), postgraduate students use hedges more frequently than undergraduate students, but this study's findings show that undergraduate students also use a significant number of hedges. On a different note, Ho and Li (2018) made a connection between the use of hedges and the type of writing (timed versus untimed). They explained that the limited time students have to write their essays contributes to the increased use of hedges, as it reduces their opportunity to consider the most effective way to present propositional content in English. In order to enhance the persuasiveness of an essay, particularly an expository one, it is crucial for the writer to convey both uncertainty and confidence in their argument (Skelton, 1988; as cited in Ho & Li, 2018). Nonetheless, using hedges in academic writing, like those items found in research journals, may show that the author is aware of many perspectives and views, which encourages debate (Hyland, 2005; as cited in Qin & Uccelli, 2019).

Attitude markers

Table 6: The use of attitude markers in the corpus

Attitude markers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Important	152	34.62
Even	100	22.78
Must	99	22.55
Have to	45	10.25
Interest	20	4.56
Prefer	12	2.73
Correctly	3	0.68
Ought	2	0.46
Unfortunately	2	0.46
Hopefully	1	0.23

I agree	1	0.23
Pleased	1	0.23
Remarkably	1	0.23
Total	439	100

Table 6 specifies that there are 13 types of attitude markers in the document analysis. The most common attitude markers used by the students are “important” (152 items), “even” (100 items), “must” (99 items), and “have to” (45 items). Surprisingly, students managed to use the least common attitude markers, such as “hopefully”, “I agree”, “pleased”, and “remarkable”, which have been used at least once in these expository essays. Like earlier research by Hyland (2012) and Thomson (2021), “important” was the most common attitude marker in this corpus. Students may view attitude indicators as expressing “subjectivity rather than objectivity, which may conflict with their notion of academic writing” (Lee & Deakin, 2016, p. 29; as cited in Thomson, 2021).

The low use of attitude markers in writing discourse has also been reported in various genres such as research reports (Letsoela, 2013), persuasive essays (Tan & Wong, 2014), and various genres compiled in a corpus, like argumentative, cause-effect, opinion, and comparison-contrast (Yuksel & Kavanoz, 2018). According to Pavlovic and Dordevic (2020), students’ lack of awareness about the functions and importance of attitude markers, as well as their potential impact on readers, contributes to their low use. Additionally, they contended that students often lack confidence when discussing certain points in their arguments, leading them to choose not to express their attitude towards the topic. Moreover, Tan and Wong (2014) emphasised that Malaysian undergraduate students had a low awareness of attitude markers among the metadiscourse categories, with the lowest use, which echoes the decrease in metadiscourse awareness of these markers. The lack of use could be an indicator that it is a more challenging metadiscourse feature to use, and the students have a lack of exposure towards these metadiscourse features, which cannot be remedied in a short intervention.

Conclusion

This study investigated the use of interactional metadiscourse markers in expository writing by Malaysian ESL undergraduates, focusing on their types, frequency, and patterns of use. Using Hyland’s (2005) interpersonal model as the analytical framework, the research revealed that while students employed all five categories of interactional markers, hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers, their usage was often unbalanced and formulaic. The most frequently used category was self-mentions, followed by boosters and engagement markers. This indicates a tendency among students to assert a personal stance and manage certainty. However, the limited use of hedges and attitude markers

suggests underdeveloped rhetorical strategies for expressing evaluation and involving readers. These findings reflect a developing awareness of audience and stance but also point to a need for more nuanced control over such features in academic writing. Overall, the results suggest that Malaysian ESL undergraduates are at an intermediate stage of rhetorical competence. They recognise the need to position themselves in relation to their readers, but often lack the range, appropriateness, and strategic variation required for effective academic communication.

This study makes a significant contribution to ESL pedagogy in Malaysia by offering empirical insights into how Malaysian undergraduates use interactional metadiscourse markers in expository writing, a genre that has been underrepresented in prior research. By addressing the research questions, namely, the types and frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers used, and what these patterns reveal about students' rhetorical competence, the study highlights areas where ESL learners struggle to meet academic writing conventions. Notably, the overuse of self-mentions such as "we" and "our" and the relatively low use of hedges and attitude markers suggest limited awareness of authorial stance and audience engagement strategies. These findings reveal not only a reliance on L1 rhetorical habits but also a pedagogical gap in teaching the pragmatic and rhetorical functions of metadiscourse. As such, the study provides a clear directive for Malaysian ESL educators to incorporate explicit instruction on metadiscourse into writing curricula. Emphasising rhetorical awareness, appropriate tone, and genre sensitivity can help students develop more reader-oriented, persuasive, and academically appropriate writing. By contextualising the data within Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model, the study also strengthens the theoretical foundation for integrating metadiscourse instruction into syllabus design, thereby advancing the pedagogical treatment of stance and engagement in Malaysian ESL classrooms.

Despite offering valuable insights, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the research was conducted using data from a single public university in Malaysia, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other ESL contexts or institutions with differing student demographics and proficiency levels. Secondly, while efforts were made to ensure a range of expository essay types, the writing prompts, particularly those involving social issues, may have inadvertently influenced students' stance-taking and use of interactional metadiscourse. As noted in Yoon (2020), topic familiarity and emotional framing can significantly affect the deployment of boosters and engagement markers. Thirdly, the study did not include a native-speaker comparator corpus, which restricts the ability to benchmark Malaysian students' metadiscourse use against established norms in L1 academic writing. Without such a reference point, it is difficult to determine whether the observed patterns reflect unique L2 features, instructional gaps, or broader genre conventions. Future studies may benefit from expanding the sample across multiple institutions, diversifying prompt topics to reduce bias, and incorporating native-speaker corpora for more robust comparative analysis.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several pedagogical and research-oriented recommendations are suggested to enhance students' academic writing. First, language instructors should provide explicit instruction on metadiscourse by teaching the definitions and functions of each type, using authentic examples from academic texts, and offering practice activities for identifying and applying markers effectively. Second, since rhetorical features vary by genre, genre-based writing practice should be emphasised. For expository writing, students need proper guidance to analyse model essays to see how metadiscourse supports clarity and argument, and they should be encouraged to use stance and engagement markers purposefully. Third, incorporating corpus-based tools, such as learner corpora and software like AntConc, can help students notice patterns in their own writing. Language instructors might create small corpora from student essays to support this. Fourth, reflective practice should be promoted through journaling, peer review, and revision, helping students become more aware of their rhetorical choices and audience needs. Finally, future research could expand the sample size, explore different academic disciplines, track metadiscourse development over time, examine proficiency-related differences, and assess the impact of targeted instruction. These approaches can bridge rhetorical gaps in ESL writing, helping learners become more persuasive and confident academic communicators.

Author Contributions

SFK and NK conceived the study and contributed to the data interpretation and literature review. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Writing Between the Lines: ESL Learners' Metadiscourse Awareness and Its Impact on Writing Performance

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Abstract

Many English as Second language (ESL) learners find it difficult to write in their second language writings. One of the ways to overcome it is by using metadiscourse (MD). MD refers to devices that assist writers in interacting with their readers and explaining their thoughts coherently. However, many learners are unaware to use or do not appropriately utilize MD devices in their writing. Meanwhile, researchers in Malaysia have paid little attention to the MD in the writing. Therefore, this quantitative study was conducted to examine ESL learners' awareness of MD and its relationship to their ESL writing performance. Utilizing purposive random sampling method, 60 undergraduates were selected from a local institution in Malaysia. The data were gathered using an English-written essay and a questionnaire. The essays were assessed using a verified scale and the response from questionnaire was evaluated using the SPSS software. The findings indicate that the participants have a minimal knowledge of MD. Most participants have low awareness of MD devices and low use of the MD devices in their writing. Furthermore, this low awareness and knowledge of MD slightly affect their writing performance which is at moderate level. The study gives insight to researchers and lecturers, not only in the language field but in other areas, on improving the learners' awareness and use of MD which would eventually increase their writing performance.

Keywords: *ESL learners: metadiscourse awareness; writing performance*

Introduction

Many ESL students find writing challenging because it requires organizing thoughts into language while considering reader expectations (Naim et al., 2020). At the tertiary level, this difficulty increases as students must produce complex, sophisticated texts (Kashiha, 2018). Cohesion is another issue, requiring appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures to create meaningful writing (Kashiha, 2022). Academic success demands skillful argumentation and idea synthesis (Hyland & Tse, 2004), but ESL learners face additional hurdles due to linguistic limitations (Rahman et al., 2022).

Examining the aspects on how ESL learners acquire and utilize MD features in their writing offers valuable insights. MD in writing and speaking assists readers and writers in recognising its significance and guarantees that both parties comprehend the topic. Reyes et al. (2024) in their study also highlighted the importance of teaching MD as a way to enhance learners' understanding of language use and support

increased control and personal expression in academic writing. Furthermore, Hyland (2005) highlighted that instructing learners in MD markers offers three key benefits. First, it enables learners to recognize the cognitive demands imposed by texts and understand how these markers facilitate the writing process. Second, exposure to MD markers enhances learners' motivation to sustain and defend their viewpoints. Third, it equips writers with the ability to effectively reinforce their arguments for the reader. Ultimately, the integration of MD markers significantly enhances the overall learning process.

Currently, ESL writers frequently encounter difficulties in effectively employing appropriate interactional MD strategies, which may impede their capacity to articulate a clear stance and engage readers with the content presented (Musa et al., 2019). Furthermore, ESL learners have a limited understanding of MD markers and use certain MD markers only, such as transition markers and self-mentions, exclusively in their writing (Mat Zali et al., 2022).

As highlighted by Alharbi (2021) and Kashiha (2018), analyzing their application of MD in different genres like expository writing underscores their significance for L2 writers. Additionally, expanding the corpus with a stronger focus on Malaysia could yield more robust findings. Therefore, this study investigates Malaysian undergraduates' MD awareness and its relationship with their writing performance of expository essay. Existing MD research primarily addresses ESL writing pedagogy rather than learners' MD awareness. While prior studies have examined MD in various contexts of academic writing (Mohd Noor & Mohamed Alam, 2017), argumentative essays (Aziz et al., 2016), persuasive writing, doctoral proposals (Lo et al., 2020, 2021), and evaluative writing (Mat Zali et al., 2022; Zali et al., 2021), little attention has been given to learners' MD awareness in academic writing. Given this gap and the principle that knowledge precedes usage (Aliyu & Korau, 2020), this study focuses specifically on undergraduates' MD awareness and its correlation with writing performance.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What is the ESL learners' awareness of MD?
2. What is the relationship between the ESL learners' awareness of MD and their writing performance?

Literature Review

Definition of Metadiscourse

Metadiscourse refers to linguistic devices that organize discourse, guide reader interpretation, and signal writer stance. Hyland (2005) defines it as "self-reflective linguistic material" that frames primary content while engaging audiences. Ädel (2006) emphasizes its role in "writer-reader interaction," classifying it as

textually oriented (e.g., transitions) or interactively oriented (e.g., hedges). Harris in 1995 takes a broader view, describing metadiscourse as "discourse about discourse"—markers that explicitly reference the act of communication itself (e.g., *as noted earlier*). Collectively, these definitions highlight metadiscourse's dual function: structuring text and negotiating social interaction. Traditionally, MD elements have been categorized into two categories; interactive and interactional MD.

Model of Metadiscourse: Interactive Vs Interactional Metadiscourse

In the ESL context, the definition of MD is clearer by Hyland (2004), who views MD as "self-reflective linguistic expressions referring to the evolving text, to the writer, and to the imagined readers of that text". It is based on a view of writing as social and communicative interaction and, in academic contexts, which describes the ways writers project themselves.

The model proposed by Hyland (2005) includes two types of MD: interactive and interactional measurements. The interactive MD helps the writer in organizing propositional content for clarity. *Transition Markers, Frame Markers, Endophoric Markers, Code Glosses, and Evidentia*l are these highlights. Interactive MD refers to the writer's consideration of the audience and how he conveys the audience's plausible information, interests, expository desires, and handling capacities. Its purpose is to diagram a book to address the reader's concerns and ensure that the writer's intended understanding and goals are met. Thus, interactive MD directs the reader through the text. In this sense, it alludes to techniques for organizing speech. *Endophoric Markers* allude to data in other parts of the content (for example, see fig. x), *Evidentials* allude to data from other writings (for example, as indicated by x, z states), *Frame Markers* allude to talk acts, successions, or stages (for example, at last, to conclude), and *Transition Markers* pass on the relations between sentences.

Interactional MD enables writers to provide commentary on their messages. This current 'writer's manner of a printed "voice" is referred to by Hyland as *Self-mentions, Hedges, Boosters, Attitude Markers, and Engagement Markers* (Hyland, 2005). The interactional MD involves the reader in the argument and reveals the writer's perspective on the propositional content (Hyland, 2004). *Self-mentions* indicate the level of unambiguous creator proximity in the content' (Hyland, 2005). This is indicated using first-person pronouns and possessive descriptors such as "I, me, my, our, mine, and us." The terms 'the writer, the essayist, the writer's, and the writer's' can also be used to highlight *Self-Mentions*. *Hedges* are utilized "to perceive elective voices and perspectives to preserve the promise of the proposal" (Hyland, 2005). *Hedges* express the writer's information as a sentiment or a conceivable thought rather than a fact. For example, "in my opinion, as I like to believe, likely and tend." Various elements constitute *Boosters*. Unlike *Hedges*, *Boosters* assist learners in communicating their ideas with confidence. Models are "in actuality, unquestionably and disobediently". *Engagement Markers* are employed by writers to directly address and

draw in readers to the discussion. This should be achievable using inclusive 'we, our, and us', reader pronouns 'you and your', and the question mark. The most obvious sign of a writer's dialogic awareness, according to Hyland (2005), is when the writer alludes to readers by posing questions, making suggestions, and appropriately responding to them. *Attitude Markers* are the last interactional high points. They demonstrate the writer's empathic, as opposed to epistemic, disposition towards suggestion. Examples include "lamentably, strikingly, and fortunately." (Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007) demonstrating that strong essays contain more MD than weak ones. However, the use of interactional MD depends on the writer's writing ability, of which most writers are not completely proficient if their papers are compared to those of expert authors or native speakers (Mohd Noor & Mohamed Alam, 2017).

For this study, the authors referred MD definition and MD model by Hyland (2005) since it was widely used by previous researchers like Ekawati & Al Rosyiidah (2022), Goltaji & Hooshmand (2022), Hanim et al. (2020), Mat Zali et al. (2024), Shafqat et al. (2020), Zahro et al. (2021) and Zali et al. (2021). Instead, the model is understandable and comprehensive to be used in the ESL writings. The table 1 below presents the details of the classification of MD model which will be adopted in this study.

Table 1: Hyland's model of MD

Category	Function	Examples
Interactive	Help to guide the reader through the text	
Transition Markers	Express relations between main clauses	In addition, but, thus, and, because
Frame Markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	Finally, to conclude, my purpose is
Endophoric Markers	Refer to information in other parts of texts	(in) (this) Chapter; see Section X, Figure X, page X; as noted earlier
Evidentials	Refer to the information from other texts	(to) quote X, according to X
Code Glosses	Elaborate propositional meanings	called, defined as, e.g., in other words, specifically
Interactional	Involve the reader in the text	
Hedges	Withhold commitment and open dialogue	Apparently, assume, doubt, estimate, from my perspective, in most cases, in my opinion, probably, suggests
Boosters	Emphasize certainty or close dialogue	Beyond doubt, clearly, definitely, we found, we proved, it is an established fact.
Attitude Markers	Express writer's attitude or proposition	I agree, I am amazed, appropriate, correctly, dramatic, hopefully, unfortunately.
Self-mentions	Explicit reference to authors	I, we, the author
Engagement Markers	Explicitly build relationship with reader	We, our (inclusive), imperative mood.

Metadiscourse Versus Writing performance

Metadiscourse, which refers to the linguistic devices writers use to guide readers through a text, can significantly enhance writing performance by improving clarity, coherence, and engagement. According to Hyland (2005), MD markers such as transitions ("however," "therefore") and frame markers ("in conclusion") help organize ideas logically, making texts easier to follow. Additionally, interactive MD (e.g., hedges like "possibly" or boosters like "clearly") allows writers to strategically modulate their stance, fostering persuasive communication (Jiang & Ma, 2023). Research by Abdel Latif (2022) also highlights that MD supports reader-writer interaction, as engagement markers (e.g., "consider," "note") directly address the audience, increasing textual involvement. In academic writing, the use of MD has been linked to higher-quality arguments and improved reader comprehension (Dahl & Pérez-Llantada, 2020), demonstrating its role in effective communication. Thus, incorporating MD can refine writing performance by enhancing structure, credibility, and audience awareness (Alqarni, 2024).

Previous Studies

There are several scholarly researches that delve into the importance of MD awareness among ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in writing. A study conducted by Aliyu & Korau (2020) reveals that Nigerian undergraduate students generally have low awareness of MD, which correlates with lower quality in persuasive writing. The findings suggest that enhancing MD awareness can lead to improvements in writing performance.

Akinseye (2023) explored the use of interactive MD as a discursive technique for improving academic writing skills among ESL undergraduates in Nigeria. A total of 100 expository writings were used. The study employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative component examines the types and applications of discursive techniques used in the selected expository writing, whilst the quantitative component focuses on the occurrence of these tactics. The findings show that transitional markers, frame markers, and code glosses were the most utilized interactive markers in academic writing, while evidential and endophoric markers were employed less frequently. These findings highlight the pedagogical importance of including interactive materials in the teaching of academic writing skills to ESL undergraduate learners.

Tahmasbi et al. (2024) currently conducting a study to investigate the effect of MD markers instruction on expository writing of 80 male and female EFL learners in a school setting, who were chosen through convenience sampling and interviewed with a smaller number of participants. A statistical test of covariance revealed that MD markers instruction had a substantial effect on EFL learners' expository writing. Another conclusion was that participants used interactional MD markers frequently.

In the Malaysian context, according to Chan & Tan's (2010) study on L2 writers in their argumentative essays, Malaysian undergraduates produced more interactional MD markers than interactive MD markers. that high English-proficient Malaysian undergraduate writers use a higher frequency of MD devices in their writing than their low English proficiency counterparts. The high English proficiency level students also utilize a greater variety of MD forms as opposed to the low proficiency students. Intriguingly, Mahmood et al. (2017) also discovered that Pakistani undergraduate learners were more likely to use interactional MD markers than interactive ones in their corpus of argumentative writings, like Chan & Tan's (2010) findings. Transition Markers were discovered to be the most utilized feature by L2 learners.

Tan & Eng (2014) investigated the use of MD among Malaysian undergraduates. The results indicated that between the two main domains of MD both groups of writers exhibited a greater preference for the use of interactional MD than the interactive. Between the two groups of writers, it was the HEP writers who exhibited a higher frequency of use for both the interactive and interactional MD. In terms of the forms used, the HEP writers also used a greater variety of MD forms when compared to the LEP writers.

Using Hyland's Interactional MD Table (2005), Zali et al. (2020) analyzed the corpus of 200 evaluation essays written by Malaysian ESL learners enrolled in hard and soft science courses. The purpose of the study was to determine if learners in both groups used the same amount of meta-discourse, if learners in distinct course groups chose MD differently, and if MD was utilized more or less in both courses. According to the analysis, learners in soft science subjects utilized more MD characteristics than learners in hard science courses. In addition, it was observed that learners frequently used self-mentions and had few attribution indicators in their writing.

Zali et al. (2021) contrasted the use of interactive and interactional MD research on how L2 learners constructed MD functions. 200 evaluative essays written by undergraduate computer science and business learners at UiTM were analyzed based on Hyland's framework (2005). The objective is to determine how frequently and what types of meta-discourses are employed, as well as whether learners in different course groups make decisions differently. In both courses, interactive learning was utilized more frequently than interactive MD, according to research. Self-references are the most prevalent trait, whereas attitude indicators are the least prevalent. Both courses' transition markers share the same distinguishing characteristic. The distinction between the two courses is the transition markers. In terms of evidence, business administration courses are the least specific, in contrast to computer science frame markers.

Mohamed et al. (2021) conducted an MD study in 2021 using 195 potent persuasive essays authored by Malaysian student authors. The study examined the frequency of MD markers used in both organizational and interpersonal discourse markers in the essays of good undergraduate writers, as well as how these MD markers are identified and classified into main categories and subcategories, according to Lon et al. (2012)'s simplified MD framework for ESL lay writers. According to the findings, college learners use more

organizational discourse markers. Interpersonal discourse markers are less common in the corpus because of the writer's usage of these norms to draw readers into the text's discussion. In this circumstance, these inexperienced college learners would use fewer hedges. This quantitative research was conducted to look at the relationship between ESL learners' awareness of MD and their writing performance.

Methodology

This quantitative research which is a preliminary study was conducted to look at the relationship between ESL learners' awareness of MD and their writing performance. The site of this study is a local university in Malaysia. Specifically, ESL learners from the diploma level were considered for the study. By utilizing purposive sampling method, the participants of this study were 60 undergraduates taking English classes, specifically they are taught writing in the class. They were purposefully selected because it assumed that they had attained a certain level of proficiency in writing in English in their first year of the University. Also, they have acquired a certain level of proficiency in the English language based on the minimum entry requirement for admission into the University. In fact, the participants were not given any formal MD teaching in their writing class.

Two instruments; a writing task and a questionnaire were utilized for data collection. The writing task was given to the participants to ascertain their writing quality. They were given two hours to write individually an expository essay with the similar topic, “Ways to overcome Cyber-bullying”. They were asked to write about 250-300 words for the essay. The writing task is a part of their assessment in the English class which is the full mark is 20. Then, the writing will be evaluated by three different raters using common holistic essay scoring rubric with three components; language 10, content 7 and organization 3 as attached in appendix.

The questionnaire was used to collect data regarding the participants’ knowledge of MD. The questionnaire is divided into four sections. The first section elicits the participants’ background information which includes their grades, educational background knowledge of MD and academic writing. The second section gathers participants’ experiences writing in English. The third section elicits participants’ information about MD and the last section is about the information on the participants’ use of MD devices in their writing. Sections C and D are adapted from Bogdanović & Mirović (2018). The modifications are made to suit the current study as this study focused on ESL learners. Table 2 below shows the reliability result of questionnaires done using Cronbach’s alpha during the pilot study. Each item of questions has obtained more than .80 which indicates good internal consistency (Cohen, 1988). This suggests that the items within the instrument are reliably measuring the same underlying construct, and the responses are consistent across items. According to commonly accepted thresholds, a value above 0.70 is considered

acceptable, while values above 0.80 indicate good reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Having obtained permission from the Department, the consent of the participants was sorted for. They were asked to fill in an informed consent form. In fact, this study received ethical approval from the university's Research Ethics Committee (REC/04/2024 (PG/MR/4)).

Table 2: Reliability Statistics Result of questionnaires

No.	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1.	Part A: Personal Information	.892
2.	Part B: Writing Experience	.922
3.	Part C: Information Related to Metadiscourse	.842
4.	Part D: Use of Metadiscourse in Essay	.852

The data were collected in two stages. In the first stage, the questionnaire was administered to the participants to fill out and submit to the researchers. In the second stage, the participants were given a topic to individually write an essay of about 250-300 words within 2 hours. As mentioned previously, two sets of data were gathered, and the data were analyzed using different methods of data analysis. To achieve the first objective of the study on the ESL learners' awareness of MD, the data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed descriptively using SPSS. To ease the comparison, the mean of collected data was divided into three categories; high, moderate and low. Finally, to achieve the second objective of the study which is to examine the relationship between the undergraduates' awareness of MD and writing performance, the essays written by the participants were graded by three experienced raters. Similarly, the participants' writing scores were compared with those of MD awareness by using the mean category as mentioned before.

Findings

The data gathered for the study were analyzed and the findings are presented based on the research questions of the study.

Research Question 1: What is the ESL Learners' Awareness of Metadiscourse?

To achieve the first research question of the study, the data obtained using the questionnaire were analyzed. From the responses of the questionnaire, it was found that all the participants have more than ten years' experience of learning English, since from their primary and secondary schools to their tertiary level. The other findings are presented in the following subsections which include their writing experiences that are considered difficult by many of the participants; information related to MD where the majority of the participants are not much aware of the term and the utilization of MD in their writings.

Writing Experiences

The participants were also asked to rate their experiences and perceptions of writing in English by indicating the extent to which they agree with each statement by using a 5 Likert scale; 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= undecided, 4=agree and 5= strongly agree. From their responses, it is revealed that the majority (about 65 %) of the participants agreed that they like writing in English. However, items 2 shows that writing in English is a very difficult task for many of the participants, especially in organizing my ideas in a logical sequence, developing ideas and using the appropriate style of writing as indicated by items 6, 7 and 8 respectively.

Table 3: Summary of the Participants' Writing Experiences

S/N	Item	1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)	M	SD
1.	I like writing in English.	0.0	10.0	30.0	58.3	1.7	3.5167	.70089
2.	Writing in English is a very difficult task.	0.0	13.3	16.7	65.0	5.0	3.6167	.78312
3.	To succeed in my university studies, I must write well in English.	0.0	1.7	3.3	66.7	28.3	4.2167	.58488
4.	I have difficulty choosing an appropriate word/phrase in my writing.	0.0	10.0	33.3	56.7	0.0	3.4667	.67565
5.	I tend to use wrong grammar in my writing.	0.0	13.3	45.0	40.0	1.7	3.3000	.72017
6.	I have problems organizing my ideas in a logical sequence.	0.0	3.3	18.3	71.7	6.7	3.8167	.59636
7.	I have difficulties developing ideas for my writing.	0.0	1.7	23.3	70.0	1.7	3.7833	.55515
8.	I have difficulty using the appropriate style of writing.	0.0	5.0	15.0	78.3	1.7	3.7667	.56348

Information Related to Metadiscourse

As for the awareness of MD, the participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they are aware of MD with 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= undecided, 4=agree and 5= strongly agree. The results have shown that more than 50 per cent of the participants were unaware of the term as shown by all the items in the questionnaire because they disagreed and were unsure. It is further indicated that most of the participants neither premeditate the use of MD while writing in English nor pay much attention to MD when writing in English as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of the participants' information on metadiscourse

S/N	Item	1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)	M	SD
1.	I know what metadiscourse is.	11.7	21.7	25.0	41.7	0.0	2.9667	1.05713
2.	I premeditate the use of metadiscourse while writing in English.	10.0	6.7	35.0	48.3	0.0	3.2167	.95831
3.	I pay much attention to metadiscourse when writing English.	8.3	11.7	31.7	48.3	0.0	3.200	.95314
4.	I have a set of metadiscourse that I regularly use while writing in English.	8.3	13.3	26.7	51.7	0.0	3.2167	.97584

Use of Metadiscourse

As for the use of the MD device, the participants were asked to choose numbers 1-5 to indicate how often they use the following expressions when writing English: 1=I don't use them at all, 2=I rarely use them, 3=I occasionally use them, 4= I use them quite often, 5=I always use them. The results of the questionnaire show that the expressions that explicitly refer to you as the author (I, we, my, our) become the highest mean scores of (M 4.1833). Followed by expressions that refer to writing organization, express sequence, label text stages, announce discourse goals, or indicate topic shift (finally, to conclude, the purpose is, first, next) have the second-highest mean scores of (M 4.1000). While the expressions that refer to the source of information from other texts/papers/ books (according to X, Z 1990, Y states, as shown in [1]) recorded the lowest mean scores (M 2.633) in Table 4.

To enable the researchers to ascertain the participants' awareness of MD, the results of the participants' writing experiences, information on MD and the use of MD were categorized into three levels (high, moderate and low). The participants' writing experiences as presented in Table 6, have shown that the majority of them have a positive attitude but face a lot of difficulties of writing in English. The participants' awareness of information on MD is presented in Table 7 which shows that a larger percentage of the participants (60.7%) have low information on MD. Finally, the results of the analysis of the participants' use of MD in academic writing as presented in Table 8 show low use of MD by the participants.

Table 5: Summary of the participants' use of metadiscourse in academic writing

S/N	Item	1(%)	2 (%)	3(%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	M	SD
1.	Expressions to indicate semantic relation between main clauses and main sections in your writing, (but, thus, in addition, consequently etc).	1.7	0.0	28.3	53.3	16.7	3.8333	.76284

2.	Expressions that refer to writing organization, express sequence, label text stages, announce discourse goals, or indicate topic shift (finally, to conclude, the purpose is, first, next)	0.0	6.7	8.3	53.3	31.7	4.1000	.81719
3.	Expressions that refer to information in other parts of your writing (noted above, see Fig., in section 2)	5.0	41.7	35.0	18.3	0.0	2.667	.83700
4.	Expressions that refer to the source of information from other texts/papers/ books (according to X, Z 1990, Y states, as shown in [1])	13.3	31.7	35.0	18.3	1.7	2.633	.99092
5.	Expressions that restate and explain information for better understanding (namely, e.g., such as, in other words)	0.0	5.0	31.7	46.7	16.7	3.7500	.79458
6.	Expressions that withhold your full commitment to the information (might, perhaps, possibly, about, approximately, to some extent)	1.7	20.0	43.3	30.0	5.0	3.1667	.86684
7.	Expressions that emphasize your certainty in the information stated (in fact, definitely, it is clear that)	1.7	10.0	40.0	41.7	6.7	3.4167	.82937
8.	Expressions that explicitly express your attitude towards information in your writing (unfortunately, I agree, surprisingly, promising idea, important contribution)	1.7	10.0	45.0	30.0	13.3	3.4333	.90884
9.	Expressions that build relationship with the reader (consider, note that, you can see that)	0.0	16.7	36.7	40	6.7	3.3667	.84305
10.	Expressions that explicitly refer to you as the author (I, we, my, our)	0.0	5.0	11.7	43.3	40.0	4.1833	.83345

Table 6: Level of participants' writing experiences

Category	Frequency	Percentage
High	26	43.3
Moderate	22	36.7
Low	12	20.0
Total	**60**	**100.0**

Table 7: Level of the participants' information on metadiscourse

Category	Frequency	Percentage

High	20	33.3
Moderate	12	20
Low	28	46.7
Total	**60**	**100.0**

Table 8: Level of the participants' use of metadiscourse in academic writing

Category	Frequency	Percentage
High	20	33.3
Moderate	18	30.0
Low	22	36.7
Total	**60**	**100.0**

Research Question 2: What is the Relationship between the ESL Learners' Awareness of Metadiscourse and Their Writing Performance?

To achieve the second objective of the study, which is to examine the relationship between the ESL learners' awareness of MD and writing performance, the participants' essays were graded, and the scores were compared to the results of their MD awareness obtained from the questionnaire. The average scores of the participants' essay is Content 5, Language 6 and Organization 2 as indicated in Table 9. Based on this common holistic essay scoring rubric (see appendix A), the participants' essays show a good response to the question, having clear and effective introduction and thesis statement. The essays contain considerable understanding of ideas, information and issues. In fact, they have clear topic sentences with reasonably developed and relevant details or examples. The essays also consist of appropriate and correct vocabulary and also adequate wrap-up of main points. As for language, the participants' essay contains several grammatical errors; occasionally affecting the readers' understanding and consist of minor errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation. Lastly, for the organization, participants' essays have adequate structure of introduction, body and conclusion, appropriate and sporadic transitions and satisfactory paragraphing. The results of the participants' essay were further categorized into three: high (from 16-20), moderate (from 15.9-10.1) and low (below 10). As indicated in Table 10, it shows the learners' score is moderate level.

Table 9: Summary of the participants' writing scores

S/N	Components	Scores
1	Content	5
2	Language	6
3	Organization	2

Table 10: Level of Participants' Writing Quality

Category	Frequency	Percentage
High	24	40.0

Moderate	34	56.67
Low	2	3.33
Total	**60**	**100.0**

Discussion

Therefore, to answer the first research question of the study, it could be seen that despite the positive attitude and experiences of writing in English, most participants have low awareness of MD devices and slightly low use of the devices in their writing. This study agreed with the study conducted by Aliyu & Korau (2020) which revealed that learners are unaware of MD devices. It may seem surprising that the participants have very high positive experiences of writing in English. but low information on MD. It is not surprising because while filling out the questionnaires, the participants informed the researchers that they were unaware of the term MD. Most of the participants revealed that they were unfamiliar with the MD term. Furthermore, the results may appear contradictory in that the participants have little information on MD but slightly moderate use of MD devices in their writing. They may use the devices subconsciously.

The findings have proved the study conducted by Haruna et al., (2018) which suggested that many of the undergraduates were not exposed to MD because they write academic essays in the same manner they speak. The findings further agree with the findings of (Mat Zali et al., 2020; Zali et al., 2021) which observed that learners prefer to employ specific MD devices while ignoring or using less of other types in their writing. This suggests the students' lack of MD awareness. This is because of over usage or underusage of MD could both affect writing quality negatively.

To answer the second research objective, it was found that writing performance of the most of participants are moderate but they have low awareness of the use of MD devices. Thus, it could be concluded that there is a slightly positive relationship between the participants' awareness of MD devices and their writing performance. The finding is not surprising because many studies show that MD are essential devices that ensure effective academic writing. Thus, since most of the participants have low awareness of MD, their writing performance is presupposed to be low or moderate as well. The findings agree with the findings of previous studies on MD. For instance, Tan & Eng (2014) show that high English-proficient Malaysian undergraduate writers use a higher frequency of MD devices in their writing than their low English proficiency counterparts. The high English proficiency level students also utilize a greater variety of MD forms as opposed to the low proficiency students. Based on the results, it could be concluded that the high the English proficiency of students, the greater their awareness of academic writing conventions and MD. On the other hand, the lower English proficiency of students, the lower their awareness of academic writing conventions and MD.

Conclusion

The study aims to examine the ESL learners' awareness of MD and its relationship with their expository writing performance. MD has been neglected by many researchers in investing in the writing skills. The findings show that the participants have low awareness of MD and there is a slightly positive relationship between their awareness and their writing performance. The findings are crucial as they suggest that awareness and usage of MD can help to develop learners' mostly expository writing. The findings also reveal the need to teach learners most especially the awareness of the readers and how to convince the audience in their writing, as it is shown that generally explicit instruction of MD markers significantly improves learners' writing ability (Aliyu & Korau, 2020). The need is crucial since the teaching of MD is neglected even among language instructors. While assessing learners' writings, lecturers, regardless of the field of study, should place much emphasis on how learners convince their audience in their writing.

The study implicates the need to teach MD markers to ESL learners during their writing class. It is because when they have this MD knowledge, the learners will be more aware and use these MD markers in their writing which helps them to connect the sentences cohesively and coherently and also communicate with the readers of the essay successfully. To sum up, while MD awareness is important in improving ESL learners' writing, teachers, instructors and lecturers should cooperate to create the learners' awareness and ensure its usage in any ESL writing.

There are a few limitations of the study. One limitation of this study is the small sample size (n = 60), which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. The use of purposive sampling may have introduced bias, as the participants were selected based on specific characteristics and may not represent the wider ESL learner population. As data were collected through self-reported questionnaires and writing score, there is a possibility of social desirability bias affecting participants' responses. Due to time limitations, the study was conducted over a short period, which may not reflect changes in learners' MD use over time. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into MD use, and it lays the groundwork for future research to expand upon these findings with larger and more diverse samples.

Therefore, further studies can randomly select a larger number of participants. The study only describes the undergraduate learners' MD awareness levels and expository writing performance which does not give any treatment. Thus, future studies could adopt an experimental research design to investigate how to increase ESL learners' awareness and usage of MD in academic writing.

Author Contributions

MMZ conceived the study and designed the experiments. MMZ, NAAR & ACM. conducted the study and collected the data. MMZ. analyzed the data and prepared the figures. NAAR contributed to the data

interpretation and literature review. MMZ & ACM. wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix A

Expository Essay Rubrics

SCORE	7-6	5-4	3-2	1	0
Content (7 marks)	Excellent response to the question Well-developed and engaging introduction Very clear/effective thesis statement	Good response to the question Clear and effective introduction Clear and relevant thesis statement	Adequate response to the question Adequate introduction Satisfactory thesis statement	Inadequate response to the question Inadequate introduction Weak thesis statement, or off topic	Task not attempted

	Thorough, insightful understanding of ideas, information, and issues Effective topic sentences with well-developed details/examples Accurate and effective vocabulary Effective and powerful closure (Beyond restating the thesis)	Considerable understanding of ideas, information, and issues Clear topic sentences with reasonably developed and relevant details/ examples. Appropriate and correct vocabulary Adequate wrap-up of main points	Some understanding of ideas, information, and issues Adequately developed topic sentences with satisfactorily developed details and examples Adequate vocabulary or vague at times Simple restatement of the thesis statement as closure	Inadequate understanding of ideas, information, and issues Weak topic sentences with inadequately developed/ and irrelevant details/examples Inappropriate or incorrect vocabulary Abrupt closure/ Repetition of the thesis statement	
SCORE	**10-9**	**8-7**	**6-5**	**4-3**	**2-1**
Language (10 marks)	Hardly any grammatical errors; barely noticeable Hardly any errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation	Very few grammatical errors; noticeable but not significantly affecting understanding. Minimal errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation	Several grammatical errors; occasionally affecting understanding Minor errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation	Many grammatical errors; consistently affecting understanding Many gross errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation	Serious grammatical errors; affecting meaning and understanding Too many gross errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation
SCORE	**3**	**2**	**1**		
Organization (3 marks)	Very clear structure of introduction, body and conclusion	Adequate structure of introduction, body and conclusion	Inappropriate or incorrect structure of introduction, body and conclusion		

	Effective, mature and appropriate transitions Clearly organised paragraphs	Appropriate and sporadic transitions Satisfactory paragraphing	Incorrect transitions/ no attempt to use transitions Inadequate or no paragraphing		