CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

iELT-Con 2025

12th International English Language Teaching Conference

18 & 19 August 2025

Bayview Hotel Georgetown,
Penang, Malaysia

"SUSTAINABILITY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE"

PELLTA

Editor
Seok Hoon Quah

eISSN 3009-0504

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Penang English Language Learning and Teaching Association

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PPM-017-07-04111990

eBook Edition: 2026
eISSN 3009-0504

Published by
Penang English Language Learning And Teaching Association (PELLTA)

This publication is provided for educational purposes. It is published every two years in conjunction with PELLTA's biennial international English language teaching conference, iELT-Con.

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PREFACE

The Penang English Language Learning and Teaching Association (PELLTA) organised its 12th international English language teaching conference, iELT-Con 2025 from 18 – 19 August 2025 with the theme “Sustainability in English Language Teaching: Strategies for the Future”.

iELT-Con 2025 was an enriching and insightful two days of professional sharing of knowledge, expertise and experience especially in the areas of how the teaching of English can remain sustainable in this era of artificial intelligence and great technological advancements. Keynote presentations were 45 minutes and featured speaker sessions were 30 minutes. Meanwhile paper presentations oriented towards research and best practices were each 20 minutes in length and workshops 40 minutes. A total of 5 keynotes, 4 featured speaker sessions and 35 parallel papers and 10 workshops were delivered with participants from 10 countries across the globe.

This conference proceedings contain 6 peer-reviewed full papers which were submitted after the conference and we would like to share them with our readers, presenters and non-presenters alike. In Chapter 1, Joshua Antle examined the viability of extensive reading as part the tertiary curricula in Japan. Meanwhile Chapter 2 by Chee Chiew Pei studied the effects of consciousness-raising in process writing on ESL learners’ writing skills and motivation to learn. The next two chapters focused on artificial intelligence (AI): first, Ngui Geok Kim reported on the findings of her investigation on the AI readiness of TESL trainee teachers and highlighted the importance of her findings in helping future teachers to design AI-integrated lessons to benefit their students. Next, in Chapter 4 *Integration of AI in Teaching Writing using Malaysian Folklore,* Norzetty Md Zahir, Nelly Ngoi, Farah Natchiar Mohd. Khaja and Ahmad Najmuddin Azmi reported that AI integration would not only boost the learners’ writing skills but also, contribute to the maintenance of the students’ cultural heritage. Another technological innovation in the form of virtual exchanges in Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) was explored in a case study by Saranyaraja Muthumanairaja, C.J. Shilaja, Divyabha Vashisth & Payal Khurana. They studied the cross-cultural virtual exchange between Indian and Japanese university students and argued for it as a means of empowering women through English, the language of communication in Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6 *Mentoring Without a Map: How Leadership Shapes Language Teacher Identity in ESL Programs* by Wendy Ven Ye Teh and Jefferey Tzetzien Tan examined how leadership practices can influence the identity development of English language teachers.

To sum up, we thank all presenters for their contribution to iELT-Con 2025 and to this compilation of research findings and great ideas for English language teaching and learning in this digital era. We would also like to express our gratitude to the panel of reviewers for their time and invaluable comments in reviewing the articles. Thank you!

Seok Hoon Quah, PhD

PANEL OF REVIEWERS

The Proceedings of PELLTA's 12th. International English Language Teaching Conference (iELT-Con 2025) would not have materialised without the contribution of the panel of dedicated reviewers. We would like to express our sincere appreciation to the following people for their time, effort and constructive comments that helped the authors to improve on their papers.

Dr. Leong Mi-Chelle
Rovena Elaine Capel
Emily John Wejidas
Jasmine Selvarani Emmanuel
Jayalatha G. Kumarasamy
Kam Lay Khuan
Koek Shin Yee
Koet Tian Wei
Wan Nor Asmah Bnti Arshad

1 The Viability of Extensive Reading: Can ER Become a Mainstay in Universities?

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Abstract

Extensive reading (ER) has increasingly become a larger part of university curriculums. However, it is not clear if students agree that ER should constitute a larger part of their studies. The aim of this study was to determine if the students would like ER to be a greater part of their school curriculum after having taken this first-year class. At the university in which this study took place, first-year students take a nine-week ER class. While this class is a good introduction into ER for the students, since it is only nine weeks, ER's potential benefits might not be realized by the students. A questionnaire was used to collect data about the students' impressions of this class. The results showed that the students had a positive impression of ER and noticed its benefits on their English proficiency despite the class's short duration. However, the majority of students worried about ER being a larger part of the curriculum given the time required for it and their other class assignments. Based upon these findings, it is recommended to include ER as part of the larger curriculum, but it is also important to incorporate it in such a way as to not be overly demanding upon the students.

Keywords: Extensive reading, student impressions, university curriculum

Introduction

The motivation for conducting this study was a desire to see extensive reading (ER) become a larger part of my university's curriculum. The university in which this study was conducted has a first-year ER class; however, after one term, the students are not required to do ER in any of their other English classes despite ER's potential benefits and the positive impression ER has on the students.

This paper will first present a review of the previous literature with a focus on the university level. The subsequent sections will present the methodology used for this study and then the results. The final section will be a discussion based upon these results.

Literature Review

ER, defined as reading large volumes of accessible material for general understanding and pleasure, has been widely recognized for its multiple benefits—ranging from vocabulary growth and fluency to motivation, writing proficiency, and critical thinking (Day & Bamford, 2011; Waring, 1997). The following sections explore ER's multifaceted contributions, with special emphasis on university learners.

Theoretical Foundations and Core Principles

ER has been characterized as “reading as much as possible, for pleasure, in materials self-selected and easy enough for the reader” (Day & Bamford, 2011, p. ix). Learner autonomy, comprehensible input, and motivation are core principles of ER. Waring (1997) elaborates on how graded materials aligned with learners’ levels support engagement and comprehension. Essentially, ER requires learners to read large amounts of text that are both enjoyable and easy to comprehend. Graded readers are essential to ER; they allow students to find their appropriate level of comprehension and then to be able to freely choose material of interest to them. Graded readers typically have six levels which range from low beginner to advanced. By randomly reading a page from a graded reader, a student can quickly find their appropriate level; they should understand about 98% of the words on the page, so there is a high likelihood of being able to guess any unknown words’ meaning from the context. Additionally, due to the large number of graded readers available at each level, it is easy for students to find titles which are interesting for them.

Central to ER theory is a focus on vocabulary acquisition through incidental exposure. Researchers stress the need for “right-fit” texts (typically 98% known vocabulary) to facilitate noticing, retrieval, repeated encounters, and elaboration, thereby deepening lexical knowledge (Nation, 1997; Nation & Waring, 2020). It is essential that learners read texts that are at the i -1 level, that is a level slightly below their current level

When considering the overall language learning curriculum, ER can easily be placed in Nation’s Four-Strand Framework (1997). The four strands are meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, structured language learning and fluency. ER is considered an excellent source of meaning-focused input as the learners would be reading the story for the purpose of enjoyment.

University Student-Focused Studies: Methodology and Outcomes

Research into extensive reading has increasingly emphasized its role in university contexts, particularly for students in an English as a foreign language (EFL) environment. One example is the study by Anggia and Habók (2025), who investigated the effectiveness of online ER among university students. Their research employed a clustered random sampling design that divided students into two experimental groups and one control group, totaling 350 participants. Using pre- and post-TOEFL reading tests and surveys that measured variables such as self-beliefs, reading motivation, and reading behavior, they found that students in the ER groups significantly outperformed those in the control group in reading comprehension. Interestingly, the study highlighted the mediating role of motivation, showing that self-efficacy

predicted motivation, which in turn predicted reading behavior. While reading behavior itself did not directly mediate comprehension gains, the findings underscored the importance of students' affective factors in making ER effective.

Another important contribution comes from a Turkish English for Academic Purposes (EAP) case study (Savaş, 2009) conducted at Kocaeli University, which contrasted the outcomes of ER-based instruction with traditional intensive reading and translation exercises. In this study, 112 students were divided into experimental and control groups. The ER group selected accessible texts, produced collaborative reports, and gave presentations, while the control group continued with traditional methods. Comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary development were assessed through six monthly multiple-choice exams as well as performance on the official UDS exam, a national test of English proficiency. The results demonstrated that the ER group not only made greater progress in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition but also developed a range of transferable skills, such as meta-cognitive awareness and the ability to synthesize information for group tasks.

A larger-scale Japanese study by Robb and Kano (2013) provided more conclusive evidence. Across a university-wide ER program that required students to read at least five graded readers per semester, more than 2,000 participants' results were tracked and compared with previous cohorts. Students who engaged in ER significantly outperformed earlier groups on standardized comprehension measures. A subsequent analysis by Taylor (2014) confirmed these gains, reporting a strong effect size for reading comprehension and modest improvements in listening. These findings echo Mermelstein's (2014) semester-long study, in which students who engaged in weekly silent reading both in and outside the classroom showed marked increases in graded reader test scores compared to controls. Together, these studies affirm the positive effects of ER in structured university settings, while also pointing to the need for consistency and institutional support in order for programs to achieve their full potential.

Writing Proficiency and Critical Thinking Transfer

While ER is often associated with vocabulary and reading speed (Antle, 2011), a growing body of research demonstrates its benefits for writing and higher-order thinking. Tamirat and Teshome (2025) conducted a semester-long intervention that investigated the relationship between ER and academic writing proficiency among undergraduate EFL students. Their mixed-methods design included pre- and post-tests of essay writing, student questionnaires, and teacher interviews. Quantitative data showed a significant positive correlation between frequency of ER and writing scores, with particularly strong associations

with lexical diversity and coherence. The mean essay scores of both third- and fourth-year students improved dramatically, with gains of nearly 20 points on a 100-point scale, and statistical analysis confirmed the significance of these improvements. Qualitative feedback reinforced these results: students reported that ER increased their motivation to write and provided useful models of vocabulary and syntax, while teachers highlighted the role of ER in exposing students to authentic discourse structures.

The contribution of ER to writing proficiency is not new. Earlier research had already established links between reading for pleasure and improved written output. Janopoulos (1986) found that students who read extensively outside class displayed stronger writing proficiency, while Hafiz and Tudor (1990) demonstrated substantial improvements in written English among Pakistani students after an ER program. Robb and Susser (1989) similarly reported gains in writing among Japanese students engaged in sustained ER, and Tsang (1996) found that among three instructional approaches, ER alone produced the strongest improvements in both writing content and language use. These studies, although conducted in varied contexts, consistently suggest that ER enables learners to internalize grammatical patterns, discourse structures, and vocabulary through repeated exposure, which are then transferred to their writing.

The impact of ER also extends to critical thinking. Larhmaid (2025), in a case study of Moroccan university students, observed that beyond vocabulary and comprehension gains, ER participants reported improvements in critical engagement with academic texts. Over 80% of the students stated that ER had helped them develop the ability to evaluate texts more critically, and classroom observations revealed that they could make more nuanced inferences and connections. This suggests that the benefits of ER extend beyond linguistic skills, shaping learners into more autonomous and reflective readers and writers.

Mechanisms, Methodologies, and Contexts

Taken together, research on ER reveals a consistent pattern of benefits for university learners, but the mechanisms by which these benefits occur merit careful consideration. One widely accepted explanation is incidental learning, whereby students acquire new vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and discourse conventions through repeated exposure to meaningful input. This process is supported by Nation's (1997) framework, which outlines the progression from noticing unfamiliar words to repeated retrieval and elaboration. Regular exposure also facilitates fluency development: as learners become more familiar with lexical items and syntactic patterns, they achieve greater automaticity in word recognition, which in turn improves reading speed and comprehension. Studies such as those of Robb and Kano (2013)

and Mermelstein (2014) provide empirical backing for this explanation, as both demonstrated measurable increases in reading speed and comprehension after sustained ER interventions.

Motivation and affective engagement represent another key mechanism. By allowing students to choose texts that interest them, ER fosters a sense of autonomy and enjoyment that is often lacking in traditional, intensive reading approaches. Maley (2008) emphasizes that this pleasure-driven reading creates a "virtuous circle": enjoyment leads to more reading, which enhances proficiency, which further reinforces motivation. Anggia and Habók's (2025) online ER study supports this claim, demonstrating how self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation mediated gains in reading comprehension. Similarly, Tamirat and Teshome (2025) found that students were more motivated to write after engaging with ER, particularly when texts aligned with their personal interests.

Finally, the methodologies employed across ER research strengthen the reliability of its findings. Meta-analyses by Nakanishi (2015) and Jeon and Day (2016) provide strong statistical evidence for ER's effectiveness, reporting medium to large effect sizes across a range of skills. Quasi-experimental and experimental studies, such as those by Suk (2017) and Aka (2019), confirm these benefits in controlled contexts, while mixed-methods studies like Tamirat and Teshome (2025) offer deeper insights into both quantitative outcomes and learner perceptions. Program evaluations, including those at Turkish and Japanese universities, demonstrate ER's practicality and scalability in authentic classroom contexts. Together, these methodological approaches reveal not only that ER is effective, but also that its impact is multifaceted—spanning vocabulary growth, fluency, writing proficiency, motivation, and critical thinking.

Extensive reading has consistently demonstrated its power to enhance second-language learners' vocabulary, reading speed, comprehension, writing skills, motivation, and critical thinking. Experimental and case-study research shows strong outcomes within university EFL contexts. Blended program designs—integrating graded reading with writing and discussion—amplify benefits, and mixed-methods approaches offer robust insight into both outcomes and learner experiences.

Research Questions

Taking into consideration the context of the study and also the literature reviewed, the following research questions were investigated:

1. What are the students' impressions of ER?
2. Would the students like ER to be a larger part of their studies? Why or why not?
3. Over the course of the term, what level of graded readers do the students choose?

4. Are book reports an effective method to ascertain if the students actually read the graded readers?

Methodology

This study was conducted over two university terms, each lasting nine weeks. In total, 39 students from two different classes (one Term 1 class and one Term 3 class) participated in the study. The participants were mostly first-year students.

In the first class, the teacher-researcher explained the class structure and grading criteria. Additionally, the benefits of ER were explained to the students. Towards the end of the first class, each student selected their first graded reader. The students were encouraged to select a graded reader that was both interesting and easy to understand. There was enough time for the students to exchange their books if it turned out that they were too difficult or not interesting. Each student was instructed to finish their first book report by the beginning of the following class. The students were assessed for this class using the following criteria: attendance/participation, quality of their book reports, quantity of reading done, and one five-minute oral presentation. The absolute minimum amount of reading to qualify for a passing grade was three graded readers consisting of a total of at least 250 pages.

A typical class would start with a small warm-up speaking activity. There would then be three or four short presentations from the students about one of the books they had read. After the presentations, the students would make small groups and discuss the books they were currently reading. The purpose of this activity was both to provide opportunities for speaking practice and to expose students to different books they might want to read in the future. Group members changed each class. At the end of class, students would exchange their books for new ones if needed and then engage in silent reading.

At the end of the ninth class, the students completed a questionnaire eliciting their opinions about ER. There were eight items on the questionnaire, each of which was associated with one of the research questions of this study. All items had Japanese translations, and the students were allowed to respond to the open-ended items in Japanese as well. The students were told that the questionnaire was optional and would not affect their grade in any way. They were encouraged to answer the questions honestly.

The questionnaire items were as follows:

1. Did you enjoy this ER class?
2. Was this your first time doing extensive reading? (ER - reading easy books for at least two consecutive months)

3. Do you think the book reports are the best way to check that students actually read the book?
4. Do you have another idea to check that students actually read the books? Please write your idea here.
5. Would you like ER to be a regular part of your studies at Tsuda? Perhaps as a small part of your seminar classes. You would discuss your book for 5 minutes during your seminar class each week. You would try to read at least one book every three weeks.
6. Do you want to comment on the previous question?
7. Even though we only did ER for a short amount of time, do you think ER helped any of the following English skills? Check all answers that apply.
8. Which of the following statements best applies to you?

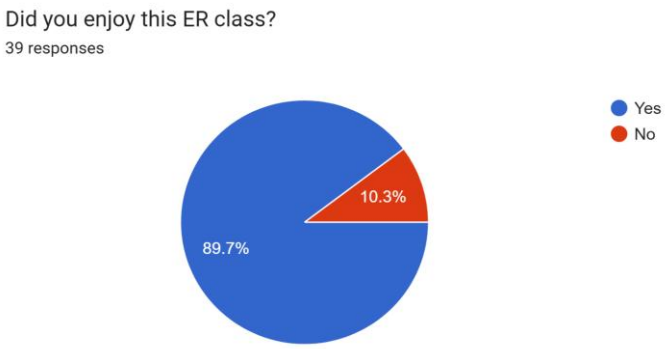
The questionnaire results will be shown in the following section.

Findings

The findings from each questionnaire item are presented below. Figure 1 shows the results of the first questionnaire item.

Figure 1

Student Enjoyment of ER



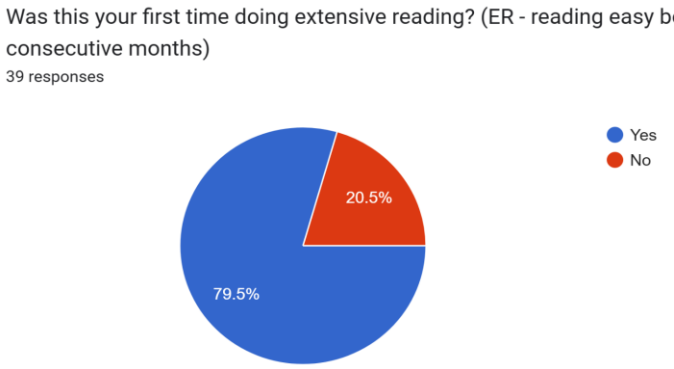
n=39

In total, 35 (89.7%) of the students indicated that they enjoyed the ER class.

Figure 2 shows the results for the second questionnaire item.

Figure 2

Previous Experience with ER



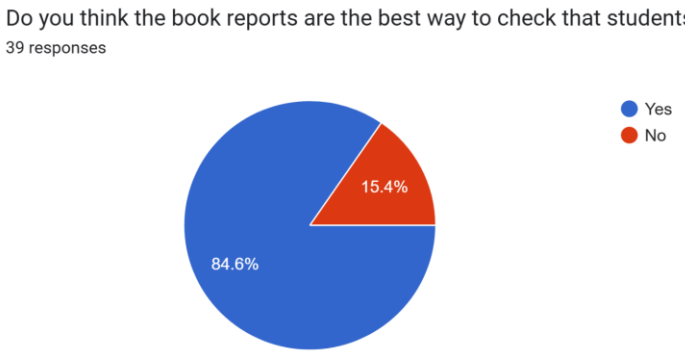
n=39

Of the 39 students, only 8 students had engaged in ER prior to taking this class.

In Figure 3, the third questionnaire item's results can be seen.

Figure 3

Student's Opinions about Book Reports



n=39

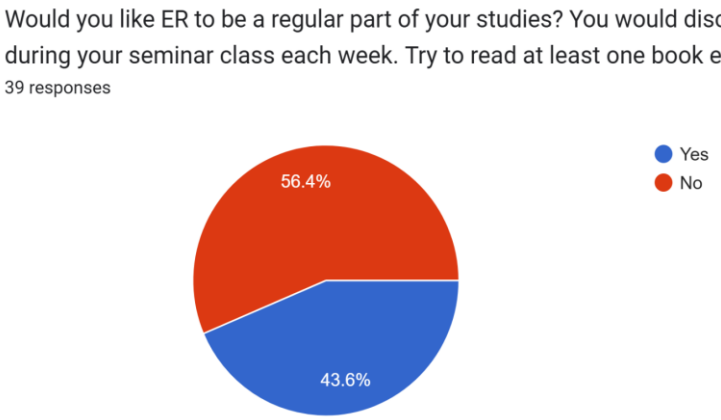
The majority of the students, 33 (84.6%), felt that the book reports were the best way to check whether they had actually read the books.

- 'Allow students to complete a simple quiz on the contents of each book using Google Forms.' (6 similar ideas about testing students' comprehension of the story.)
- 'Ask students to describe in detail memorable scenes.' (3 responses about describing a scene.)
- 'Make a poster introducing the book.'

Figure 4 shows the results for the fifth questionnaire item.

Figure 4

Student's Desire to Incorporate ER into the Overall Curriculum



n=39

The majority of the students, 22 (56.4%), did not want ER to be a regular part of their studies. This questionnaire item also had an optional follow-up question. Only seven students answered, and their responses are presented below.

Against ER as regular part of studies:

- 'It's a bit difficult because we have other assignments' (4 similar comments)
- 'It's boring, so I don't want to incorporate it'.

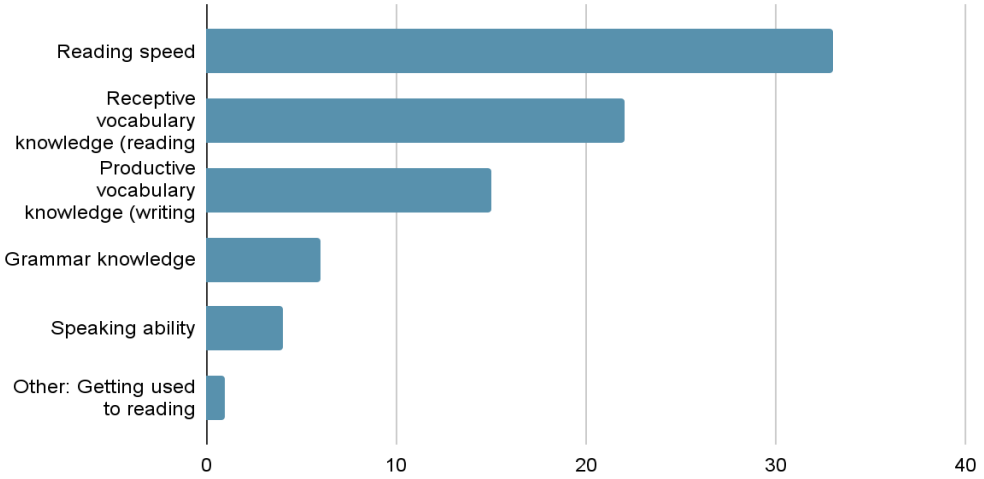
For ER as regular part of studies:

- 'I realized that my English skills have improved through ER, so I want it to be actively incorporated into the Tsuda curriculum.' (2 similar comments)

In Figure 5, the seventh questionnaire item's results can be seen. Students were asked: Even though we only did ER for a short amount of time, do you think ER helped any of the following English skills? Check all answers that apply.

Figure 5

Student's Self-Assessment of their English Skills Improvement



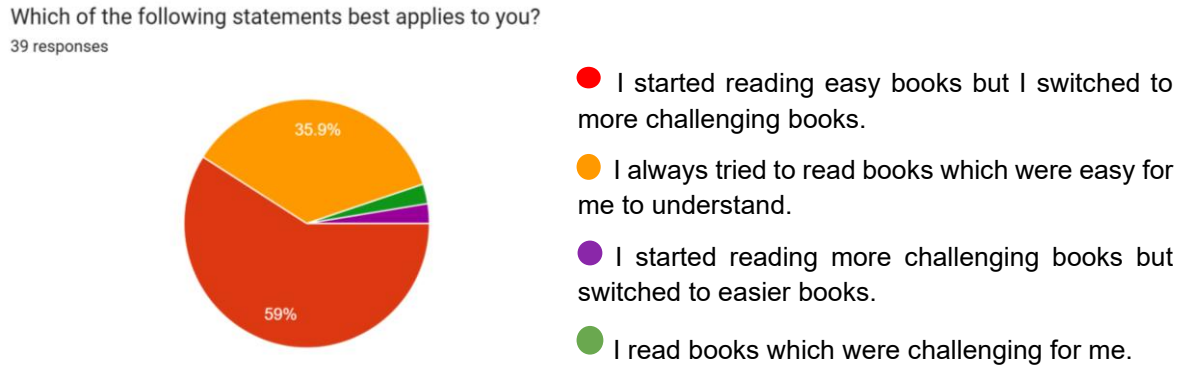
n=38

For this item, students were allowed to choose multiple skills and write in other options. One student wrote in another skill (getting used to reading) that they felt improved over the course of the term. Reading speed was the most commonly chosen skill (33 students).

The results for the final questionnaire item are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Level of Graded Readers Chosen by Students



n=39

The results show that many of the students (59%) started with easy books and switched to more challenging ones.

In the next section, the results of data analysis will be discussed in relation to the research questions.

Discussion of Findings

The four research questions will be discussed in turn by referencing the results shown in the previous section.

Discussion in relation to Research Question 1

For research question 1, ‘What are the students’ impressions of ER?’, the results indicated that the students had a mostly favorable impression of ER. Almost 90% of the students (Figure 1) indicated that they enjoyed the class. For the majority of the students, this class was their first experience engaging in ER (Figure 2). Ideally, ER is to be done over an extended period of time; however, despite this class being only nine weeks, the students mentioned many skills that they felt had improved over the term. In total, 81 skills, slightly above two per student, had improved in their opinion. The two most commonly mentioned skills were reading speed and receptive vocabulary knowledge. It is likely that if the ER was conducted over an even longer time period, skills such as productive vocabulary knowledge and grammar knowledge would also improve for more students. It should be noted though that these responses only represent the students’ own self assessment. However, skills such as reading speed and vocabulary knowledge have been associated with ER in other studies such as Antle (2011) and Tamirat and Teshome (2025) for lexical diversity, so it is likely that the students’ opinions are accurate.

Discussion in relation to Research Question 2

Research question 2, ‘Would the students like ER to be a larger part of their studies? Why or why not?’, can be addressed by referring to Figure 4 and the corresponding follow-up question. More than half of the students, 56%, indicated that they did not want ER to be a larger part of their studies. This finding seems to contradict the result just discussed, but the follow-up question elicited responses which offer clarity. Four of the seven students who responded to this follow-up question indicated that they were worried that ER would require too much time and effort given the workload in their other classes. This class was conducted during the participants' first year at university, so it is understandable that many students might have felt a bit overwhelmed by the workload required at university. It should also be noted that 44% of the students did want ER to be a greater part of the overall curriculum. Hence it would seem that if ER could be perceived as a normal part of their studies and not as extra work, it is likely the students would be more open to having ER conducted over an extended time period.

Discussion in relation to Research Question 3

For research question 3, 'Over the course of the term, what level of graded readers do the students choose?', the results indicate that most students (Figure 6), 95%, started with easy books. However, more than half of them (59%) then switched to more challenging books. It is not possible to determine if these challenging books were still at the i-1 level. Ideally, the students would not read books that were overly difficult (less than 98% known words). If the students continued to read i-1 level books, it is likely they would not view ER as being overly demanding. For ER to succeed, it is important that the reading is enjoyable. Additionally, reading i-1 level books can be considered "right-fit' texts that facilitate vocabulary learning through meaning-focused input (Nation, 1997; Nation & Waring,2020).

Discussion in relation to Research Question 4

The results corresponding to the final research question, 'Are book reports an effective method to ascertain if the students actually read the graded readers?', can be seen in Figure 3 and the follow-up question. Most of the students (84%), believed book reports were effective. Several students suggested a comprehension test as an alternative means of checking if the students actually read the books. From a practical standpoint, creating comprehension tests for each book would be a tremendous amount of work for the instructor/lecturer. Another suggestion was to have students describe a memorable scene. For larger classes, this method might also not be possible. Given that most students felt the book reports were effective, ER programs might want to implement this confirmation method.

Conclusion

Overall, findings indicate that the ER classes were a positive experience for the students. It is hoped that ER will become a greater part of language curriculums, particularly at the university level. While implementing ER is not without its challenges, if program designers keep the three main tenets of ER in mind, read a lot, read easy books and read for pleasure, there is a high chance of students reaping the benefits of ER.

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2 Effects of Consciousness-Raising (C-R) Method through Process Writing on Malaysian ESL Students' Writing Skills and Motivation

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of Consciousness raising (C-R) method through process writing on Malaysian Year Five primary school students' writing skills and motivation to learn. The study used a paired sample T- test at the level of significance p = .05 for English writing skills and motivation to learn. The analysis resulted in findings that the C-R method for the treatment group in process writing contributed to awareness towards form, content and 'use' which is helpful in writing skills development. Two intact groups from two separate schools are put into groups. The two groups are the experimental group and the control group. Both groups received instruction through the process writing approach. The control group followed the conventional process writing cycle. In contrast, the experimental group received additional treatment through C-R method during writing practice. Data analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for writing skills showed that there is a significant difference at $p<0.05$ between the experimental group and the control group. Findings indicate that it is essential to consider both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as they foster greater attention to form and the content of writing.

Keywords : Writing skills, awareness, noticing, motivation, C-R method

Introduction

Writing skills are taught as one of the tools of communication from the start of primary school. Learning to write is a foundational skill that needs to be taught so that second language (L2) learners are able to write fluently and expressively. L2 learners, especially in primary or secondary schools, often have difficulty expressing themselves. Writing skills need to be emphasized in schools. Rashid et al. (2022) claimed children must acquire this skill in primary schools if they want to be imaginative and write well in the future. Planning, drafting, revising and final drafting are four main stages as proposed by Harmer (2007). The focus of current research is on the five stages of writing that is planning, drafting, writing, reviewing and editing. It is recommended to 'use' a set of writing tools or teaching methods (Singh, 2020; Moses & Mohamad, 2019) which sought to understand and address students' writing problems.

Problem Statement

One of the biggest challenges in writing that primary ESL students faced is caused by language barriers (Nurul et al. 2021). Additionally, as noted in the Standard Curriculum for Year 5 (Ministry of Education, 2020), primary school L2 teachers also need to optimize the contact hours in learning especially for students in SJK(C) i.e. the Chinese vernacular primary schools.

Writing is both a process and a product. It is a process when students encounter the four stages of writing i.e., prewriting, drafting, revising and editing (Harmer, 2007). White and Arndt (1991) point to the importance of revising and reviewing stages. Process writing also gives due attention to the product (Raimes, 2002). Inevitably, this conveys the fundamental need of equipping students with accuracy and grammar which are paramount (Moses & Mohammad, 2019) especially among L2 learners in Malaysia so that they can learn to communicate with others. This study primarily focuses on the writing phases from planning, drafting, writing, reviewing and editing.

Writing challenges in the second language

ESL learners in primary schools face difficulty from the lack of practice and exposure to the target language. Interference of the mother tongue manifests in the wrong 'use' of English grammatical rules, morphology and syntax. Learners from vernacular schools and national schools often face writing challenges because of several of the issues mentioned.

a. Form or structure

One of the problems that learners are facing in writing is related to the lack of knowledge of semantics, specifically, word choice. Many students also struggle with limited grammar. Due to limited exposure to word choice and grammar, students have difficulty in writing essays.

b. Content

A lack of ideas in composing also leads learners to other major problems. When they are weak at composing ideas, they are generally weak at expressing themselves clearly and properly (Gan, 2013). Consequently, learners are weak at crafting main ideas. This is also reflected in their use of cohesive devices, for example, the use of conjunctions. Saravanan & Azlina (2021) suggested that students should read more in order to generate ideas and improve grammar and vocabulary knowledge.

c. Use

Writing demands learners to have basic knowledge in sentence structure and form. In addition, Swan (2007) stated that context determined structure known as pragmatics and needed to be taught. Otherwise, the whole writing process can be futile without careful planning on the teachers' part. That is why learners have to be able to 'experience' some words and expressions which are encoded in structures or sentences.

At the beginning of writing acquisition, Schmidt (1990, 2001) emphasized the importance of awareness. He stated that it is important to cultivate awareness towards form and structure among students at primary level. Therefore, this study is aimed at the application of the consciousness- raising method (C-R) in order to address the writing issue among primary school Year 5 ESL students in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Consciousness- raising (C-R)

It is important that language teachers attempt to promote noticing. Schmidt (1990)'s noticing hypothesis has led to a teaching method known as Consciousness-raising (C-R). The strategies related to C-R aimed to encourage noticing (Thornbury, 1997). In addition, C-R can foster students' capacity for noticing through successive drafts. Apart from that, the cognitive model of Swales & Feak (2009) stated that the first of the cycle begins with analysis whereby learners are guided by the teacher. The use of a series of questions also aims to build up learners' knowledge of the rule. C-R can be employed as a means of drawing students' attention to linguistic features or form. Model sentences are underlined or highlighted before moving to the next stage which is awareness. Typically, teachers draw sentences from the text. Eventually, the cycle ends with acquisition (rule activation) and achievement.

According to Abdalla (2014), English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers can apply a blend of the C-R technique and explicit, formal instruction by fortifying the pedagogical approaches that are already familiar to them. Noviati (2020) added that the C-R technique raises learners' awareness to the content, organization and language aspects of writing. Similarly, the technique can be integrated into the teaching of writing. On a different note, it is cited in Nik et al. (2010) "… the importance of writing lies in the ability to develop the language skills in terms of fluency, accuracy and appropriateness". The fundamentals of writing therefore can be seen as essential in the communication of meanings and messages.

Motivation to learn

Learners need to be motivated to make progress in writing and teacher support is essential. Based on the literature, most primary and secondary school L2 learners in Malaysia lose interest to write and stop making progress in writing. Eventually, they are unable to develop ideas or construct sentences (Nurul et al. 2021; Singh, 2020). According to Dörnyei (1994), motivation in language learning is affected by various external factors such as teachers and the learning environment. Local researchers' findings also concurred that sustaining and maintaining motivation at different levels can significantly influence students' proficiency level in English language (Sim, 2020 & Ng & Ng, 2015).

Research Objectives and Questions

This section states the research objectives and questions that guide this study.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are aimed at measuring the effectiveness of using C-R as a method in writing and are listed below.

- To examine the significant effects of C-R method on the mean score of writing skills in pre-test and post-test among Year Five ESL students on the aspects of form, content and use
- To test the significant effects of C-R method on motivation to learn among Year Five ESL students' scores in pre-test and post-test on the aspects of intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation
- To compare the significant difference of mean scores of writing skills among Year Five ESL students who are taught by the C-R method and the control group on the aspects of form, content and use

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated based on the research objectives that are outlined above.

1. Are there any significant effects of the C-R method on the writing mean scores between the pre-test and post-test among Year Five ESL students based on the aspects: form, content and use?
2. Are there any significant effects on mean scores of motivation to learn before and after the C-R method among Year Five ESL students on the aspects: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation?

3. Are there any significant differences in the writing mean scores among Year Five ESL students who are taught by the C-R method and the conventional method based on the aspects of form, content and use?

Significance of the Study

This study is conducted to bridge the gap in second language acquisition for motivation and writing skills. The findings of the study are important to inform the planning and design of the writing curriculum, especially in Malaysian primary schools. Better planning and design can contribute to more effective teaching of writing and enhance student motivation to learn.

Methodology

This section outlines the methodology used in this study, consisting of three sub-sections, namely the research design, research instrument and implementation. This research employed a pre-test-post-test experimental design to examine the effects of Consciousness Raising (C-R) in process writing.

The research sample consisted of Year Five ESL learners 11 years of age. The C-R method was carried out during process writing to study the effect on two dependent variables - writing skills and motivation in learning. The study uses non-random sampling, specifically cluster sampling, as its quantitative sampling method. According to Gay et al. (2012), cluster sampling is advantageous when individual participants are not allowed to be chosen randomly since the participants were from the same class. The experimental group consisted of 18 girls and 12 boys and control group comprised 11 girls and 17 boys. Purposive sampling is chosen as the non-random sampling method.

Research Instruments

The research instruments of this study comprised a pre-test and post-tests and a questionnaire to survey the learners' motivation to learn.

Pre-test

A pre-test was conducted before six lessons based on the theme 'World of Self, Family and Friends' in the Primary Year Five scheme of work were taught. The lessons were conducted over three weeks with C-R activities embedded during each lesson such as highlighting the form of verbs followed by correction. The correction highlighted the form (present, past and future verb tenses) prior to writing a new essay for the following week topic.

The topics covered by the teacher for this study are shown in Table 1. Each cycle corresponded with a week of teaching.

Table 1

Topics covered

CYCLE	TOPICS (TITLE OF THE ESSAYS)
1	Meeting someone new (Someone in the neighbourhood or friends)
2	A field trip to butterfly farm
3	My study buddy

Post-test

The aim of the post-test is to assess the learners' writing skills in the specific aspects under study. Both the pre-test and post- test consisted of writing a 50-80 word essay based on the topics that students had covered in class. The tests were adopted from Doff (1988). Learners wrote the essay without previous instruction from the researcher.

Motivation to learn questionnaire

In this questionnaire, there are two constructs with a total of 9 items for each construct. A five-point Likert scale was used, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).) Students were required to respond by answering all the items. According to Subakthiasih & Putri (2020), intrinsic motivation also refers to rewards provided by the activity itself. In contrast, extrinsic motivation refers to rewards that are obtained not from the activity, but as a result of the activity.

Data Analysis

Data collected in this study was analysed using the paired sample T-test and ANCOVA. The pre- and post-test essays were evaluated by both the researcher and the teacher using a writing rubric. A pilot study was conducted to estimate the score consistency of the questionnaire. In addition, the validity of the pre- and post-test material was checked for content validity (Content- related evidence of validity). Content-related evidence of validity refers to the content and format of the instrument. The validity of the test content and questionnaire was validated by two experts in the field. The intraclass correlation coefficient

(ICC) value for the writing instrument indicated r= 0.882. According to Gay et al. (2012), a correlation coefficient of 0.65 to 1 indicates a strong relation between variables. On the other hand, the motivation to learn questionnaire was administered during the pilot study. The Cronbach's alpha value for the motivation questionnaire is α = 0.81.

Results and Discussion

Results of the paired samples t-test were found to be significant in the dimensions of writing skills of form and content. Students' scores for the pre-test and post- test are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Effect of C-R method on writing skills

Variables		n	M	SD	D*f*	t	*P*
form	pre-test	30	3.40	0.86	29	6.84	0.001
	post- test	30	5.13	0.97			
content	pre-test	30	5.30	0.28	29	6.70	0.001
	post- test	30	7.17	0.19			
use	pre-test	30	2.03	0.76	29	1.56	0.129*
	post- test	30	2.27	0.64			
Overall	pre-test	30	11.73	2.36	29		
	post- test	30	14.40	1.57		7.35	0.001

Based on the findings, the C-R method helped the subjects to improve writing skills in the component of form. As seen in Table 2 above, the post- test score for the subjects is (M= 5.13, SD= 0.97) as compared to pre-test score (M= 3.40, SD= 0.86). Similarly, for content the result shows that there is a significant improvement with p value less than 0.05, across all areas of the content (main idea, coherence and word choice). The learners scored higher for the post-test (M= 7.17, SD= 0.19) compared to the pre-test (M= 5.30, SD= 0.28). The former results have proven significant. Whereas, the component of 'use' showed less significant

improvement, p › .05 with post- test score (M= 2.27, SD= 0.64) as compared to the pre-test score (M= 2.03, SD= 0.76).

As for the overall score, the result revealed that there is a significant effect t(29)= 7.345, p < .05 between the post-test score (M= 14.40, SD= 1.57) and pre-test score (M= 11.73, SD= 2.36) for the subjects in the overall writing skills result. The post-test result for form also showed a significant effect t(29)= 6.840, p < .05. As for the component of content, the result was significant at p < .05 with t(29)= 6.139. Conversely, for 'use', the result was not significant with t(29)= 1.564, p > .05.

Based on findings of the three components of writing, it can be summarized that 'form' has the most effect in the subjects' writing skills when compared to 'content'. This is largely determined by variables like word choice and the flow of ideas. Moses & Mohammad (2019) explained that structure or grammatical form will help convey meaning from the writers to the readers. Nevertheless, it is equally important that at primary school level, establishing meaning through textual context (Larsen-Freeman, 2001) is equally important.

Similarly, there was a significant improvement with p value less than .05 across content-related variables i.e., main idea, coherence and word choice). Although the component of writing that is ''use'' has no significant effect with p value larger than .05, students have also shown some improvement from the result of post- test. Hence, it can be concluded that the result of the study is similar to Sarala et al. (2019) that students mostly relied on the strategy or method employed, especially during writing process.

Table 3

Effect of C-R method on motivation to learn

Variables		**n**	**M**	**SD**	**D*f***	**t**	***P***
Intrinsic motivation	pre-test	30	28.77	5.83	29	7.65	0.001
	post- test	30	37.10	3.28			
Extrinsic motivation	pre-test	30	30.13	6.06	29	8.44	0.001
	post- test	30	39.40	3.45			
Total score	pre-test	30	58.90	10.86	29		
	post- test	30	76.50	5.67		9.08	0.001

The total motivation scores revealed that there is a significant effect $t(29)= 9.077$, $p < .05$ between the post- test score and pre-test score. The post- test result for intrinsic motivation also showed a significant effect $t(29)= 7.649$, $p < .05$ between the post- test score and pre-test score on the subjects for intrinsic motivation. Similarly, the post- test result for extrinsic motivation was significant at $p < .05$ with $t(29)= 8.444$. Based on the results from the paired-sample T test, the p-value for both intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation was less than $p = .05$. This indicated that the Year Five students were motivated to learn about writing. Jalaluddin (2019) delineated the impact of process writing on what students write and how they learn.

For second or foreign language users, editing and redrafting stages are important to help improve the students' writing skills (Harmer, 2007). The research participants were taught through the inductive method for target features such as form. In other words, the instruction enhanced the subjects' awareness towards what to write and how to write with fluency and accuracy. These students generated ideas for their essay writing by form or structure underlined. The instruction of form and meaning is enhanced to increase fluency of input through text (students' text or essays) as they participated in the five stages of process writing - planning, drafting, writing, reviewing and editing.

Results for writing skills based on groups

The ANCOVA result revealed that there is a significant difference between experimental group and the treatment group in the writing post-test, [$F (1, 55) = 40.441$, $p=0.000$, $n^2= 0.424$] for form. The result reveals that there is a significant difference for form between the experimental group and the control group. As for content, the findings also showed that there is a significant difference for content between the experimental group and the control group in the post-test, [$F (1,55)= 26.733$, $P=0.000$, $n^2= 0.327$]. For 'use', the results showed a significant difference between the experimental group and the treatment group in the writing post-test [$F (1,55) = 10.07$, $P=0.02$, $n^2= 0.155$]. Although the Eta Squared value indicates the effect size is small, 15.5%, however, the overall findings suggest that the experimental group have significantly achieved better results as compared to the control group. The partial Eta Squared value indicates the effect size, 35.0% which according to Cohen's indicates a strong effect size. Therefore, the treatment had a substantial effect on students' writing.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have provided evidence to show the effects of consciousness raising (C-R) on writing skills and motivation to learn. This method enhanced the learning of ESL writing among Year 5 learners and resulted in significant improvement in the aspects of form and content. The research questions on the effectiveness of C-R on writing skills and motivation to learn could be further investigated based on other factors such as learners' age and ability or individual differences. Besides, the findings of current research could be influenced by the effects of the teachers' teaching strategy.

There is a shortage of studies investigating C-R in the development of writing skills and the process writing approach especially in Malaysia primary school settings. Future researchers could study how this method might contribute to students' motivation to learn in other educational contexts such as in secondary or tertiary institutions.

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Appendices (Worksheets and Rubrics)

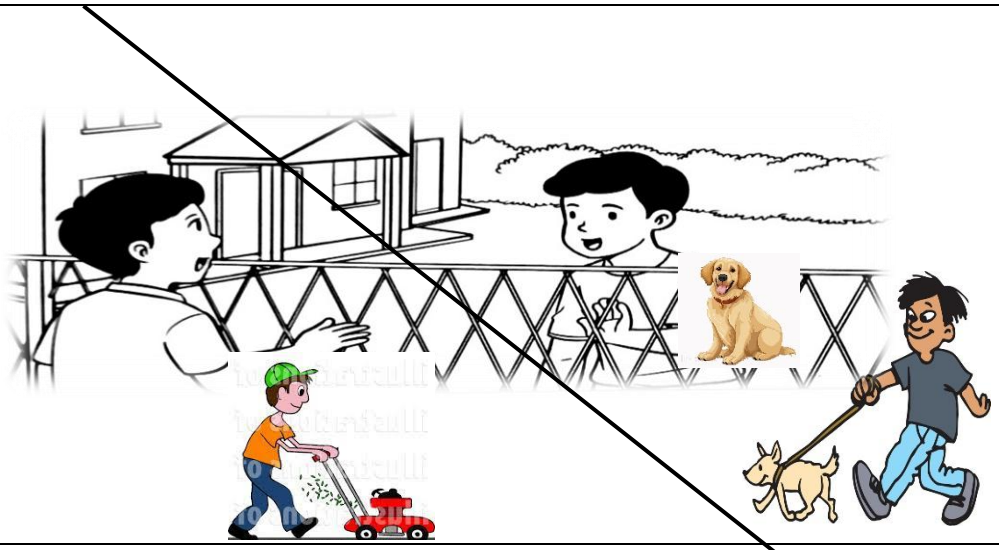
Appendix A

Title: Meeting someone new (a neighbour)

This is Jin Yi and Russell. Jin Yi is new to town. He just moved in with his family last month. Read the short note below to know more about Jin Yi.

Hi,

I am Jin Yi. I just moved in with my family last month. We were happy when we first arrived. Our neighbours, Russell and his family are very friendly. We became friends from the moment we met. In the evening, we often play at the field nearby. Sometimes, Russell walks his dog while I mow the lawn. I am so lucky to know him. Russell's father any my father are watchmen. They'll make sure the all the neighbours are safe and sound.



neighbour friendly greet each other take newspapers

everyday kind pet dog show appreciation hardworking

1-1 Write a short essay from the given picture.

You are encouraged to write in sentences <u>before</u> you begin the essay. Imagine you are Russell, write a story beginning with '*My friend and I are good friends and we ….*'

1. ****Form [vb: past form]** moved in	**Meaning** ***to move to a new place***
	Sentence: **My family and I just move into a new place.**
2. **Form [vb: past form]** became	**Meaning** ***to start to be***
	Sentence: **We became friends instantly.**
3. **Form [vb: present form]** walks	**Meaning** ***to take an animal, especially a dog, for a walk.***
	Sentence: **She walks the dog for an hour every afternoon.**
4. **Form [vb: present form]** are safe and sound	**Meaning** ***not hurt or injured***
	Sentence: **Three days later, the people are found safe and sound.**

Appendix B

Title: A field trip (to Penang Entopia)

Read a diary by Linda.

Dear diary,

Our teacher plans to bring us to Entopia, Penang. We need to bring a few items such as a rucksack, sun cream and insect spray. I'm looking forward to the trip. Our teacher also advised us to bring an umbrella if it rains. Oh, and my best friends Jasmine, Lisa and Hong will join too! We'll board a school bus together on this Sunday.

take bus from school butterfly cafe

excited insect see finish buy souvenirs

1-2 Write a short essay from the given picture.

You are encouraged to write in sentences before you begin the essay.

You can begin with *'This Sunday, Linda went…'*

1. **Form [vb: present form]** look forward	**Meaning** ***to thinking with pleasure about sth that is happening***
	Sentence: **We're looking forward to seeing you again.**
2. **Form [vb: present form]** bring	**Meaning** ***To come to a place with somebody or something***
	Sentence: **Don't forget to bring the books with you.**
3. **Form [vb: future form]** will join	**Meaning** ***To go somewhere with someone***
	Sentence: **Will you join us for lunch?**
4. **Form [vb: future form]** will board	**Meaning** ***To get on a bus, plane, ship or a train***
	Sentence: **Passengers are waiting to board the train.**

Appendix C

Title: My study buddy

This is Aina and Rubri. Both of them are classmates. Growing up, they recalled some of the memories that they had together.

Hi,

My name is Aina. Meet my best friend, Rubri. Rubri and I were both schoolmates and classmates. We get to know each other since Year Two. I am grateful that I know her. She is a wonderful friend to me. She is kind and thoughtful. She teaches me Mathematics and I teach her English. We love to spend time and study together. Once, she was bullied by a boy named Marcus. Tears began to run down her cheek. I also informed the teacher. This strengthens our relationship together as friends.

revision books share stories study buddy recess

after school cycling tuition homework best friend

1-3 Write a short essay from the given picture.

You are encouraged to write in sentences <u>before</u> you begin the essay. You can choose either character to write.

1. ****Form** was	**Meaning: *(linking verb)***
	Sentence: It was late at night when we finally arrived.
2. **Form** began to	**Meaning *[V to Inf]***
	Sentence: At last, the guests began to arrive.
3. **Form** helped	**Meaning *[V to Inf]***
	Sentence: She helped to organize the party.
4. **Form** get to know	**Meaning: *to be familiar with a person, place, thing, etc.***
	Sentence: She's very nice when you get to know her.

Write in a flow chart

Title of the essay:

Introduction: 1. Who are the characters?
2. What were they doing?

Main point 1:

Describe the event (people you see/ things you heard and what people do that capture your attention)

Main point 2: Describe the event (people you see/ things you heard and what people do that capture your attention)

Ending:

Describe your feelings on that day? For the persons in the picture

Appendix D

WRITING TEST (PRE- TEST/ POST- TEST)

BORANG PENILAIAN KEMAHIRAN PENULISAN

Instructions:

1. You are given 30 minutes to write an essay about 'My school holiday'
2. Use ALL the words given in the two boxes below to help you write.
3. YOU MUST write in two paragraphs.
4. Marks is allocated 18 for the total score.

Gender: _____

Student name: _____

No.	Field	Level of performance			Total score
		1	2	3	
1	Grammar				
2	Structure				
3	Clarity and coherence				
4	Main idea				
5	Word choice				
6	Context appropriateness				
MARKS					

Adapted from Relationship between Writing Motivation Levels and Writing Skills among Secondary School Students by Sugumlu et al. (2019)

3 AI Readiness among TESL Trainee Teachers in a Sabah Teacher Education Institution based on the AI-TPACK Framework

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Abstract

This study investigates the artificial intelligence (AI) readiness of TESL trainee teachers in a Teacher Education Institution in Sabah, Malaysia, explicitly framed within the AI-TPACK model to enhance theoretical coherence. This study aims to: (a) assess AI readiness among TESL trainee teachers based on key AI-TPACK components, (b) identify the challenges in attaining AI readiness, and (c) propose strategies for AI integration in teaching English. A survey questionnaire comprising 5-point Likert scaled items and an open-ended item was used to gather data, supplemented by desktop research to identify potential strategies for improving AI readiness. Findings reveal that while trainee teachers demonstrate high readiness in content knowledge and basic technological knowledge, their pedagogical knowledge and information literacy skills related to AI-integrated English language teaching remain at a moderate level. The study also highlights readiness gaps specifically linked to AI-TPACK constructs, such a limited AI-TPK and AI-TPACK competencies. Several challenges were identified, including lacking in exposure to AI tools, insufficient technology proficiency, language barriers, and inadequate pedagogical preparation for AI-enhanced instruction. Based on these findings, targeted strategies grounded in the AI-TPACK framework were proposed, including AI-focused workshops, the integration of AI pedagogy into the TESL curriculum, expanded access to AI resources, and mentorship or guided practicum in AI-enabled teaching environments. This study contributes to strengthening AI integration in teacher education by emphasizing the need for comprehensive preparation that equips future TESL educators with the competencies required for AI-supported ELT in the digital era.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, ESL, AI-TPACK, trainee teachers*

Introduction

Education plays a pivotal role to prepare students for the complexities and opportunities of the 21st century, where rapid technological advancements continue to reshape teaching and learning (Almazroa & Alotaibi, 2023). The accelerating integration of digital technologies, driven by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR4.0), has transformed traditional classrooms into dynamic, technology-enhanced learning environments. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education underscores digital transformation efforts through initiatives within the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025), such as the Digital Educational Learning Initiative Malaysia (DELIMa), which aims to strengthen digital competencies among teachers and learners. These policies aim to empower teachers and students with the skills needed for a knowledge-based economy (Aziz & Abd Rahman, 2023).

As technology redefines educational expectations, teachers are increasingly required to be innovative, adaptive, and capable of leveraging digital tools to cultivate critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and problem-solving skills among students (Coiro & Leu, 2020; Cosanay & Karali, 2022). Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the most transformative technologies influencing educational practices, offering tools for assessment automation, language learning support, personalised learning pathways, and intelligent tutoring. This evolution reflects the urgency for teacher education programmes to cultivate AI-related competencies that align with both pedagogical demands and technological shifts.

Teacher Education Institutions (TEIs) therefore, play a critical role in equipping TESL trainee teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required to harness AI effectively in English language teaching. Although TESL programmes traditionally emphasise linguistic, pedagogical, and methodological training, the increasing presence of AI-driven tools such as automated essay scoring systems, generative language models, and AI-supported pronunciation applications highlights growing expectations for AI literacy among teachers (Almegren et al., 2024; Vinay, 2023). Consequently, trainee teachers must now be prepared not only with theoretical knowledge but also practical, hands-on experience in integrating AI tools meaningfully into instructional design and classroom decision-making.

In light of these considerations, this study examines TESL trainee teachers' AI readiness through the lens of the AI-TPACK framework, which offers a theoretically robust structure for assessing their technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge related to AI integration. By identifying strengths, weaknesses, and contextual challenges, this research aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing AI readiness in teacher education, ensuring that future TESL educators are adequate to navigate and contribute to AI-enriched learning environments.

Background of the Study

The rapid integration of AI into educational technologies has introduced new layers of complexity to the teaching profession. While AI is not intended to replace the distinctive pedagogical role of teachers, its growing presence signifies that teaching and learning environments will increasingly be characterized by AI-mediated and AI-supported practices (Ng et al., 2021). Consequently, teachers are required to enhance their professional competencies, particularly in expanding their knowledge and pedagogical expertise to meaningfully incorporate AI tools into classroom instruction (Celik, 2023). The extent to which AI can be effectively implemented in educational settings, however, is largely contingent upon the readiness of educators, with trainee teachers representing a critical group in this process

(Wilson et al., 2022). Thus, ensuring that pre-service teachers develop adequate AI readiness during their training is essential for enabling them to utilize AI technologies confidently and purposely in future teaching. Examining their current levels of readiness, alongside identifying potential barriers and facilitators to AI adoption, is vital for informing the design of responsible training programmes and curriculum interventions.

Problem Statement

The integration of AI in education has gained substantial traction in recent years, offering new pathways for transforming pedagogical practices and enhancing learning experiences. In the context of English as a Second Language (TESL) instruction, however, the effective use of AI technologies is highly dependent on teachers' professional competencies and their ability to integrate such tools meaningfully into language teaching. The Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework has long served a foundational model for examining teachers' technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Yet, the emergence of AI-enhanced pedagogies has prompted the need to reconceptualise this framework, particularly through the lens of AI-TPACK, where competencies in AI literacy, ethical awareness, and pedagogical deployment may vary considerably among TESL trainee teachers (Ning et al., 2024). As future ESL educators, their preparedness to harness AI technologies is crucial for ensuring that AI tools are employed effectively to support language teaching. Despite this growing importance, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning trainee teachers' perceptions, competencies, and readiness to integrate AI in ESL classrooms using the TPACK perspective, especially within the context of Sabah TEIs. This gap highlights the need for empirical inquiry to better understand the extent of AI-related knowledge and challenges faced by trainee TESL educators.

This gap in existing research raises concerns regarding the extent to which trainee teachers are adequately prepared to implement AI-assisted language teaching and learning interventions in real classroom settings. At present, AI-related professional preparation for trainees remains limited, with training initiatives often fragmented and lacking systematic integration within teacher education programmes. Addressing this issue is crucial to ensure that future ESL educators possess the competencies necessary to design student-centred learning environments that effectively leverage AI technologies for language instruction. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the level of AI readiness among TESL trainee teachers in Sabah, identify challenges they encounter, and offer insights into strengthening their preparedness to employ AI in English language teaching. By bridging this research gap, the

study aims to contribute to teacher capacity-building efforts and support the empowerment of TESL trainee teachers to thrive within an increasingly AI-enhanced educational landscape.

Research Objectives

The study aims to investigate TESL trainee teachers' readiness in integrating AI into English language teaching through the AI-TPACK framework. Specifically, it intends to:

(a) Assess TESL trainee teachers' readiness to integrate AI in English language teaching based on AI-TPACK components;

(b) Identify the challenges trainee teachers face in developing AI-TPACK competencies for ESL instruction; and

(c) Explore strategies to enhance TESL trainee teachers' preparedness for AI-supported language teaching.

Literature Review

Importance of AI Technology in Education

AI refers to the capability of machines, particularly computer systems, to emulate human intelligence through processes such as learning, reasoning, and problem solving (Chiu et al., 2023). It encompasses various technological disciplines including machine learning, big data analytics, speech recognition, and natural language processing. Today, AI applications have permeated multiple sectors such as governance, business, healthcare, communication, aviation, engineering and education (Crompton & Burke, 2023). Within the education domain, AI plays a role in administration, teaching and learning, as well as assessment processes (Aldosari, 2020; Chen et al., 2020). AI-driven tools such as robotics, chatbots, intelligent tutoring systems, neural networks, and automated assessment platforms have been shown to enhance and support instructional practices (Micheni et al., 2024). As highlighted by Kamalov et al. (2023), AI is reshaping how students learn, how teachers teach, and how institutions operate.

More specifically, AI supports personalised learning by tailoring content to students' needs, learning styles, and pace, thereby increasing engagement and improving learning outcomes (Luan & Tsai, 2021). Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS) provide one-to-one, adaptive instruction comparable to human tutoring (Mousavinasab et al., 2018). These systems analyse learning behavior, track progress, and offer personalised feedback, which promotes motivation and academic performance (Kochmar et al., 2022). AI also streamlines

assessment through automated grading and real-time feedback, allowing teachers to closely monitor student performance (González-Calatayud et al., 2021; Minn, 2022). Furthermore, AI facilitates collaborative learning by helping teachers identify learner strengths and weaknesses and align them with suitable instructional strategies (Villegas-Ch et al., 2020). Tools such as chatbots enable immediate query response and foster peer interaction in supportive learning environments (Lee & Yeo, 2022).

AI Technology in English Language Teaching

The Malaysian English Language curriculum places strong emphasis on the mastery of communication skills, making it well-positioned to benefit from AI integration in the classroom (Liang et al., 2021). Core language components such as writing, speaking, reading and listening, grammar and vocabulary are fundamental targets for primary ESL learners. The emergence of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) has introduced a paradigm shift in English teaching and learning both within and beyond the school context (Chan & Tang, 2025). GAI refers to digital systems capable of producing new contents in the form of text, code, audio, images, and videos instantly and interactively (Qadir, 2022). A notable example is ChatGPT, developed by OpenAI, which operates as a generative pre-trained transformer able to generate human-like responses during conversation (Baidoo-Anu & Ansah, 2023).

AI tools have shown promising impacts on various language skills. Speaking proficiency can be supported through AI-driven pronunciation, fluency, and intonation evaluation paired with personalised feedback (Atlas, 2023). In writing, AI-generated prompts and automated feedback encourage idea development, motivation, and improvement in process writing (Liu et al., 2021; Yan, 2023). For reading, AI-powered comprehension platforms and speech recognition systems enhance fluency and reading engagement (Moorhouse, 2024). Likewise, AI-generated listening models offer diverse and authentic audio input to strengthen listening skills (Tai & Chen, 2021). Vocabulary learning is also enriched through personalised tasks (Gimpel et al., 2023), contextualised learning activities (Dwivedi et al., 2023), and multimodal input that deepens word retention (Ironsi, 2024).

Despite these vast pedagogical benefits, effective implementation relies heavily on teachers' competencies in integrating AI into language instruction (Moorhouse, 2024). Thus, the growing presence of AI in ESL education underscores the need for AI literacy among teachers, ideally nurtured during their initial teacher training programmes.

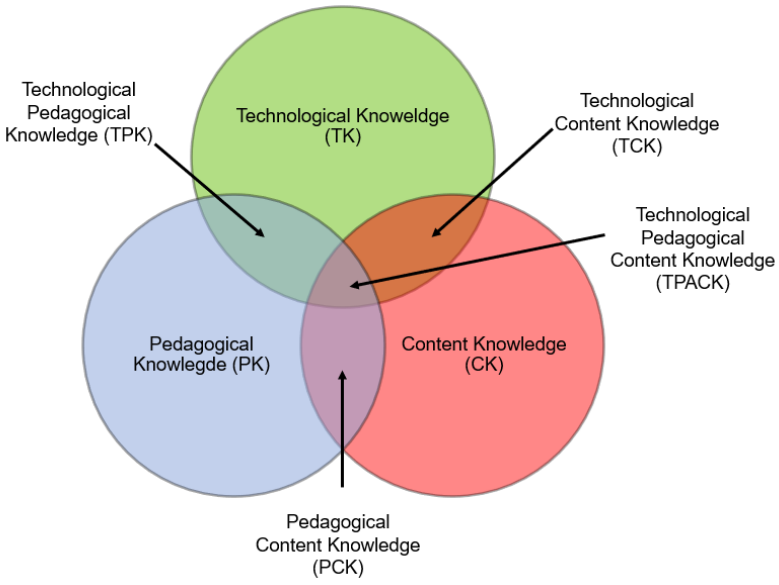
TPACK Relevance to Teacher AI Readiness

The evolving complexity of the teaching profession was first conceptualised through Shulman's (1987) Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), which emphasises the integration of subject matter knowledge (what to teach) with pedagogical knowledge (how to teach). As digital tools became increasingly embedded in instructional practices, the original PCK model expanded to include a technological dimension. This development led to the TPACK framework, which guides educators on the effective integration of technology into teaching and learning.

TPACK consisted of seven interrelated knowledge domains: technological knowledge (TK), pedagogical knowledge (PK), content knowledge (CK), technological content knowledge (TCK), technological pedagogical knowledge (TPK), pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), and the overarching technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) (Alhamid & Mohammad-Salehi, 2024). These domains highlight the need for teachers not only to master content and pedagogy, but also to strategically incorporate digital tools that support instructional goals. Figure 1 illustrates the TPACK framework as proposed by Mishra and Koehler (2006).

Figure 1

TPACK model by Koehler and Mishra (2006)



Note. Adapted from Alhamid and Mohammad-Salehi (2024, p.718)

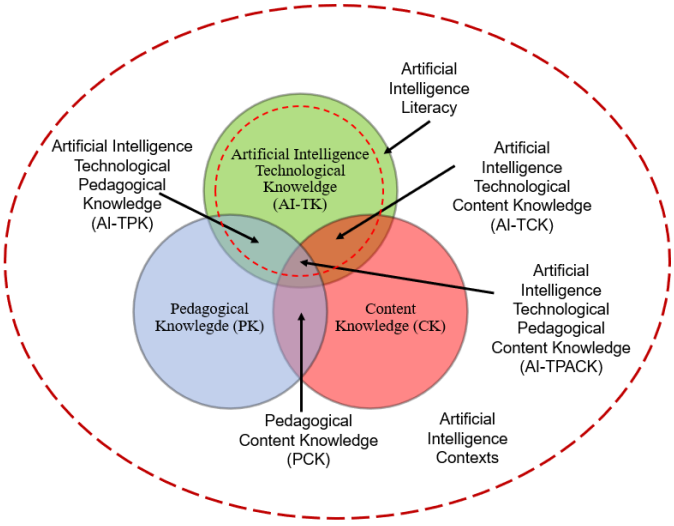
The original PCK framework introduced by Shulman (1987) highlights how teachers transform and represent subject matter in ways that promote effective learning. PCK merges

CK with PK, guiding teachers to select appropriate instructional strategies for specific content areas. With the increasing integration of technology in education, Mishra and Koehler (2006) expanded this model by introducing TK, leading to the development of TPACK. This extended framework includes the interrelated constructs of TCK, TPK, and the overarching TPACK domain, which represents the intersection of technology, pedagogy, and content. TPACK is recognized as a flexible and adaptive framework applicable across various digital tools and instructional approaches (Mishra et al., 2010).

In the context of AI integration, TPACK can also further extended into an AI-integrated TPACK model, as illustrated in Figure 2, while Table 1 outlines the components of this integration. The inclusion of AI within instructional design holds the potential to transform teaching practices, assessment processes, and learning outcomes (Jia et al., 2023). Therefore, preparing both trainee and in-service teachers as well for AI-enabled education is imperative. Such preparation necessitates the development of specific technological and pedagogical competencies related to AI use in classrooms (Hava & Babayiğit, 2024; Lodge et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023).

Figure 2

AI-Integrated TPACK Model



Note. Adapted from Ning et al. (2024, p.5)

Table 1

Components of AI-Integrated TPACK

Components	Description
Content Knowledge (CK)	Knowledge that teacher applies during teaching in specific subject domains such as English Language.
Pedagogical Knowledge (PK)	Knowledge about the pedagogical process, methodologies and practices which are contained in lesson plans, teaching methods, classroom management strategies, student behaviour and academic performance assessment, etc.
AI-Technological Knowledge (AI-TK)	Teachers' understanding and utilisation of AI technologies which include conception and familiarity of observable and concrete AI platforms, tools, productions and educational resources. It also includes AI literacy.
Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)	Knowledge needed to choose suitable teaching methods and strategies that match specific instructional content. It also entails the ability to adapt and present information to improve pedagogical outcomes.
AI-Technological Content Knowledge (AI-TCK)	The use of AI to ensure students are engaged in highly immersive and interactive learning experiences, matching their knowledge levels, cognitive states and learning styles.
AI-Technological Pedagogical Knowledge (AI-TPK)	How to use AI to transform the teaching and learning processes which encompasses recognition of mutual support, provision of resources, and identification of constraints between AI technology and pedagogy so that teachers can design effective teaching strategies and activities for students.
AI-Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (AI-TPACK)	AI-TPACK encompasses specialised knowledge for integrating AI technologies into subject-specific teaching. It involves the ability to explain subject concepts using AI tools, creatively apply pedagogical strategies in teaching with AI, leverage AI to address student challenges in understanding concepts, and utilise AI applications to either develop new ways of thinking or strengthen existing knowledge based on established principles.
AI Information Literacy (AIL)	AIL comprises of effective and ethical use of information, possessing generic information literacy skills and ability to manoeuvre in the information world.

Note. Adapted from Chan and Tang (2025) and Ning et al. (2024, pp. 5-6)

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed methods design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of TESL trainer teachers' AI readiness. The design integrated quantitative data with qualitative responses to provide a fuller interpretation of competencies, readiness levels, and perceived challenges related to AI integration. This approach aligns with recommendations in

educational technology research, where readiness constructs benefit from triangulated evidence (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2021).

Participants and Sampling

A total of 25 TESL trainee teachers from a Teacher Education Institution in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had completed their teaching practicum, ensuring that all respondents possessed authentic classroom teaching experience. Although the sample size is modest, it reflects the finite cohort size available at the institution during data collection and is methodologically acceptable for exploratory readiness studies (Chan & Tang, 2025; Wilson et al., 2022). While a larger, multi-institution sample would enhance generalisability, logical constraints limit the study to the accessible population. This study therefore, serves as a baseline investigation for future expanded research.

Research Instrument, Validation and Reliability

Data was collected through an online questionnaire consisting of two sections:

(i) Quantitative section - 33 items measured AI readiness based on the AI-TPACK components comprising AI-TK, AI-TPK, AI-TCK, AI-TPACK and AI Information Literacy. The scale was adapted from Celik (2023) and contextualised for pre-service teachers by Chan and Tang (2025).

(ii) Qualitative section – one open-ended question elicited trainee teachers' views on challenges in developing AI readiness and applying AI-TPACK.

To ensure methodological rigour, the instrument underwent content validation by two TESL/EdTech experts who reviewed item clarity, alignment, and relevance. A pilot test with 10 preservice teachers from another programme was conducted, resulting in minor wording improvements. Reliability analysis produced Cronbach's alpha of 0.92 for the full scale, with subscales ranging from 0.78 to 0.89, indicating strong internal consistency.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The questionnaire was administered online over a two-week period via Google Forms. Participants received an information brief, provided informed consent, and were assured of confidentiality. Desktop research was also conducted to identify evidence-based strategies for enhancing TESL trainee teachers' AI readiness and pedagogical integration.

Quantitative responses from the questionnaire were analysed using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics (mean, percentage and standard deviation) to establish a baseline profile of AI readiness across the five AI-TPACK components. The study intentionally adopted a descriptive analysis as its primary analytical approach because the objective was to map the current state of readiness rather than predict relationships or test causality. As an exploratory investigation positioned at an early stage of research, descriptive analysis provides a clear overview of competency levels and readiness patterns, which is methodologically appropriate for identifying trends, informing curriculum needs, and guiding future large-scale studies (McGregor, 2018; Saka et al., 2023). This approach also aligns with similar readiness-profiling research in educational technology where descriptive outputs form the foundation before more inferential or predictive modelling is conducted (Chan & Tang, 2025; Celik 2023).

Qualitative responses were analysed through content analysis, enabling the coding and categorisation of recurring themes related to challenges in AI integration. This analytical approach supported the quantitative findings by providing contextual insights into trainee teachers' perceptions, helping to interpret readiness patterns more holistically.

Findings and Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative analyses yielded findings that illustrate trainee teachers' readiness for AI integration, along with the challenges they encounter and the strategies that may enhance their preparedness. This section will first present and discuss findings from the quantitative data analyses followed by qualitative data analyses.

AI Readiness of TESL Trainee Teachers

AI readiness was examined across the five AI-TPACK domains: AI-TK, AI-TPK, AI-TCK, AI-TPACK, and AI Information Literacy. Overall, the patterns indicate uneven readiness, with stronger technological and content-related familiarity but weaker pedagogical application and information literacy. This aligns with trends in emerging literature suggesting that pre-service teachers often possess digital familiarity but limited ability to transform technology into pedagogical practice (Moorhouse, 2024; Chan & Tang, 2025). The following sub-sections elaborate these patterns quantitatively and interpret them in relation to TESL teacher education.

AI-TK Readiness

Table 2 shows that trainee teachers reported high readiness in AI-TK (M = 3.82-3.92), indicating confidence in interacting with AI tools and recognising their features. This is unsurprising, given that many are Gen-Y/Z digital natives who frequently use AI-enabled platforms (Choudhary et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2022). However, their ability to execute AI-based tasks beyond everyday use was moderate (M = 3.60). This reflects Celik's (2023) observation that familiarity does not necessarily translate to skillful academic application whereby teachers may know how to use AI, but not yet how to operationalise it for instructional requirement, lesson design, or assessment. This suggests that teacher education programmes should move beyond digital exposure and instead, emphasise task-specific modelling, guided practice, and AI-supported lesson planning, which Hava and Babayiğit (2024) argue as being more essential for bridging competence from personal use to pedagogical integration.

Table 2

AI Readiness Based on AI-TK

No.	Item	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Mean	SD
1	Know how to interact with AI-based tools in daily life.	1 (4.0%)	3 (12.0%)	21 (84.0%)	3.88	0.60
2	Know how to execute some tasks with AI-based tools.	1 (4.0%)	8 (32.0%)	16 (64.0%)	3.60	0.58
3	Know how to initialise a task for AI-based technologies by text or speech.	1 (4.0%)	4 (16.0%)	20 (80.0%)	3.80	0.58
4	Sufficient knowledge to use AI-based tools.	1 (4.0%)	3 (12.0%)	21 (84.0%)	3.88	0.60
5	Familiar with AI-based tools and their technical capacities.	1 (4.0%)	2 (8.0%)	22 (88.0%)	3.92	0.57

Note. Low – 1.00-2.66; Moderate – 2.67-3.66; High – 3.68-5.00

AI-TPK Readiness

As shown in Table 3, readiness around AI-TPK was mixed. Trainee teachers demonstrated strong perception of AI's pedagogical role, including the ability to monitor learning progress and provide feedback using AI tools (M = 3.68-3.92). However, moderate scores emerged in selecting appropriate AI tools for receptive/productive skills and evaluating AI feedback usefulness (M = 3.36-3.60). This indicates that the trainer teachers understand what AI can do but lack the ability to decide how and when to apply it effectively. This reflects Husein (2020), who states trainee teachers require extensive contextualised teaching opportunities to develop pedagogical judgement. The findings also align with Ning et al (2024), who emphasise that AI-TPK develops only when technology knowledge merges with lesson delivery experience, which is often insufficient during short practicum placements. Findings highlight the necessity for hands-on-enhanced micro-teaching, exposure to authentic AI-integrated lesson models, and reflective practice to strengthen pedagogical decision-making. As recommended by Dwivedi et al. (2023), AI readiness cannot be achieved merely through awareness as teachers must practise, evaluate feedback, and refine strategies iteratively.

Table 3

AI Readiness Based on AI-TPK

No.	Item	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Mean	SD
1	Understand the pedagogical contribution of AI-based tools in the English classroom.	1 (4.0%)	7 (28.0%)	17 (68.0%)	3.76	0.72
2	Can evaluate the usefulness of feedback from AI-based tools for English teaching and learning.	1 (4.0%)	9 (36.0%)	15 (60.0%)	3.60	0.65
3	Know how to initialise a task for AI-based technologies by text or speech.	1 (4.0%)	5 (20.0%)	19 (76.0%)	3.72	0.54
4	Can select AI-based tools for students to apply their knowledge and improve their English language skills, including both receptive and productive skills.	4 (28.0%)	8 (32.0%)	13 (52.0%)	3.36	0.76
5	Know how to use AI-based tools to monitor students' English language learning progress.	1 (4.0%)	6 (24.0%)	18 (72.0%)	3.68	0.56
6	Can interpret messages from AI-based tools to give real-time feedback.	2 (8.0%)	2 (8.0%)	21 84.0%)	3.92	0.76
7	Understand alerts (or notifications) from AI-based tools to scaffold students' learning.	4 (28.0%)	5 (20.0%)	16 (64.0%)	3.56	0.87

Note. Low – 1.00-2.66; Moderate – 2.67-3.66; High – 3.68-5.00

AI-TCK Readiness

Table 4 shows that trainee teachers generally reported high readiness in AI-TCK (M = 3.84-4.08), particularly in using AI tools to search for teaching materials and to understand content better. This suggests that trainees can utilise AI effectively in content exploration, consistent with findings that pre-service teachers tend to adopt AI initially for resource retrieval rather than as instructional mediators (Selvam & Zakaria, 2024; Moorhouse et al., 2024). However, moderate readiness was observed in awareness of the range of AI tools used in the professional ESL field (M = 3.64). This implies familiarity with general-purpose AI applications, but limited exposure to domain-specific educational tool AI such as R-rater, Grammarly Classroom, or automated writing evaluators. As Chan and Tang (2025) note, AI competency requires not just tool awareness, but strategic selection based on content purpose. Therefore, structured exposure to pedagogical AI ecosystems, tool comparison workshops, and guided exploration tasks could enhance AI-TCK. Integrating curated AI tool banks into coursework could help bridge the gap between general familiarity and professional application in real classroom contexts.

Table 4

AI Readiness Based on AI-TCK

No.	Item	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Mean	SD
1	Use AI-based tools to search for educational material in English language learning and teaching.	1 (4.0%)	1 (4.0%)	23 (92.0%)	4.08	0.64
2	Aware of various AI-based tools that are used by professionals in English language teaching.	1 (4.0%)	8 (32.0%)	16 (64.0%)	3.64	0.64
3	Use AI-based tools to better understand the contents of English language teaching.	2 (8.0%)	2 (8.0%)	21 (84.0%)	3.88	0.73
4	Know how to utilise AI-based tools for English language teaching (e.g., e-rater, Duolingo, ChatGPT, etc.).	3 (12.0%)	2 (8.0%)	20 (80.0%)	3.84	0.85

Note. Low – 1.00-2.66; Moderate – 2.67-3.66; High – 3.68-5.00

AI-TPACK Readiness

Findings in Table 5 reveal moderate readiness across all AI-TPACK indicators (M = 2.80-3.56), reflecting a challenge in synthesising content, pedagogy, and AI for instructional design. While students may be comfortable using AI tools independently, translating that into fully integrated lesson design remains difficult. This aligns with Celik (2023) and Ning et al. (2024), who assert that TPACK integration is the most complex dimension of teacher knowledge, requiring deliberate practice rather than passive familiarity. The lowest mean

corresponds to leadership in AI integration (M = 2.84) and the ability to design AI-supported lessons using diverse strategies (M = 2.89-3.16). This suggests that trainee teachers are not yet competent designers of AI-integrated lessons or decision-makers, aligning with Hussein (2020) who argues that mastery requires modelling, coaching, and reflective practice during practicum. Thus, teacher education should embed AI microteaching simulations, peer-teaching cycles using AI, and reflective practice journals. Readiness could also be strengthened through mentorship-based practicum, where trainees observe experienced teachers integrating AI strategically.

Table 5

AI Readiness based on AI-TPACK

No.	Item	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Mean	SD
1	Know how to use different AI-based tools for adaptive feedback in English language teaching.	5 (20.0%)	15 (60.0%)	5 (20.0%)	3.00	0.65
2	Know how to use different AI-based tools for personalised learning in English language teaching and learning.	5 (20.0%)	11 (4.40%)	9 (36.0%)	3.16	0.75
3	Know how to use different AI-based tools for real-time feedback in English language teaching and learning.	4 (16.0%)	15 (60.0%)	6 (24.0%)	3.08	0.64
4	Teach English language using AI-based tools with diverse teaching strategies.	7 (28.0%)	16 (64.0%)	2 (8.0%)	2.80	0.58
5	Teach English that appropriately combine teaching content, AI-based tools and teaching strategies.	6 (24.0%)	13 (52.0%)	6 (24.0%)	3.00	0.71
6	Take a leadership role among colleagues in the integration of AI-based tools into English classrooms.	7 (28.0%)	15 (60.0%)	3 (12.0%)	2.84	0.62
7	Select various AI-based tools to monitor students' learning in teaching process.	1 (4.0%)	9 (36.0%)	15 (60.0%)	3.56	0.58

Note. Low – 1.00-2.66; Moderate – 2.67-3.66; High – 3.68-5.00

AI Information Literacy Readiness

Table 6 shows that readiness in AI Information Literacy was moderate overall (M = 2.92-3.94), with strengths in understanding ethical use of information, multimodal resource familiarity, and willingness for lifelong learning. This reflects positive attitudes toward professional development, which is a strong indicator for upskilling potential (Chan & Tang, 2025). However, weaker means in identifying credible sources (M = 2.92), evaluating reliability (M = 2.96), and critical analysis (M = 3.08) suggest that trainees may retrieve information

effectively, but lack evaluative judgment in filtering AI-generated output, which is an increasingly critical skill due to misinformation risks (Smutny & Schreiberova, 2020). As GAI becomes more accessible, uncritical acceptance of AI output may hinder teaching quality if not addressed. Thus, AI readiness programmes must embed AI literacy, ethics, verification strategies, and scaffolded practice in determining output credibility. Assigning student tasks such as comparing AI-generated responses with academic sources, and analysing bias, could strengthen higher-order critical literacy.

Table 6

AI Readiness Based on AI Information Literacy

No.	Item	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Mean	SD
1	Confident in identifying the most appropriate sources of information.	6 (24.0%)	15 (60.0%)	4 (16.0%)	2.92	0.64
2	Feel comfortable using advanced search techniques to locate relevant information.	4 (16.0%)	16 (64.0%)	5 (20.0%)	3.04	0.61
3	Evaluate the reliability and credibility of information sources.	6 (24.0%)	14 (56.0%)	5 (20.0%)	2.96	0.68
4	Understand the importance of citing sources properly.	3 (12.0%)	8 (32.0%)	14 (56.0%)	3.48	0.77
5	Organise information from multiple sources and present in a clear and coherent way.	2 (8.0%)	7 (28.0%)	16 (64.0%)	3.56	0.65
6	Critically analyse information to identify biases, assumptions and potential limitations.	5 (20.0%)	13 (52.0%)	7 (28.0%)	3.08	0.72
7	Familiar with various types of information modalities including multimedia and digital resources.	3 (12.0%)	4 (16.0%)	18 (72.0%)	3.64	0.76
8	Use technology tools and applications effectively to access, evaluate and communicate information.	3 (12.0%)	2 (8.0%)	20 (80.0%)	3.76	0.78
9	Good understanding of ethical and legal issues related to the use of information, including privacy and intellectual property.	2 (8.0%)	5 (20.0%)	18 (72.0%)	3.68	0.69
10	Committed to lifelong learning and professional development, and actively seek out new information and skills to enhance knowledge.	3 (12.0%)	1 (54.0%)	21 (84.0%)	3.84	0.80

Note. Low – 1.00-2.66; Moderate – 2.67-3.66; High – 3.68-5.00

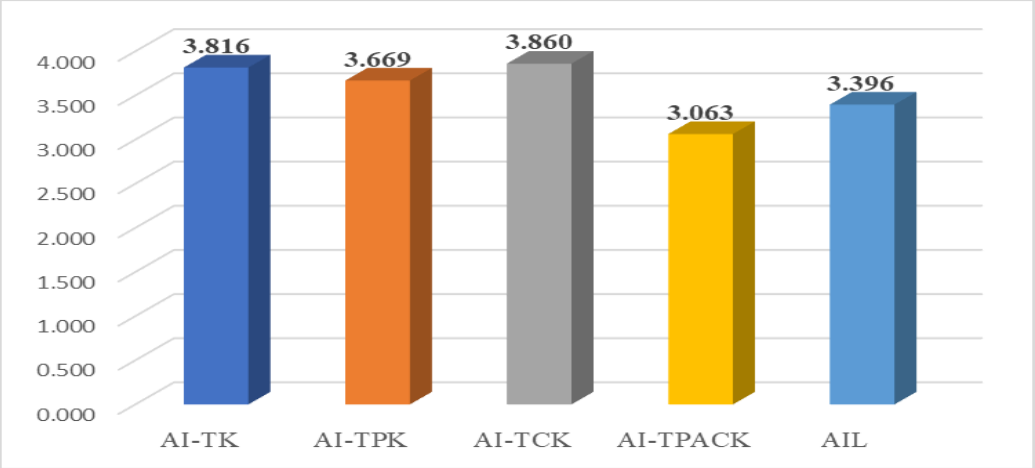
Comparative Readiness Across AI-TPACK Components

Figure 3 synthesizes readiness trends across all five domains. The highest readiness is seen in AI-TK and AI-TCK, reflecting comfort in using and navigating AI tools, particularly

for content support. However, AI-TPK, AI-TPACK, and AI Information Literacy skills show moderate readiness, indicating gaps in pedagogical application and evaluative judgment. This confirms earlier findings that technological familiarity does not automatically translate to instructional competence (Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Jia et al., 2023). The overall trend demonstrates a bottom-heavy readiness profile whereby trainees know how to use AI tools but are not yet fully prepared to design AI-supported instruction or evaluate AI information quality effectively. This reinforces the argument for AI-focused pedagogy training, not just exposure to tools. Curriculum enhancement should prioritise implementation-focused training that moves trainee teachers from tool users to lesson designers, and ultimately, informed decision makers.

Figure 3

Trainee Teachers' AI Readiness for Teaching English



Challenges Faced by Trainee Teachers in AI Readiness

Qualitative feedback revealed some challenges that hinder TESL trainee teachers' AI readiness. These challenges align with patterns frequently reported in teacher education research, where technological familiarity does not necessarily equate pedagogical readiness (Celik, 2023; Ng et al., 2024).

1. **Limited exposure to AI tools**

   Trainee teachers reported restricted exposure to AI applications specifically designed for language teaching. While tools such as ChatGPT and Duolingo were commonly mentioned, awareness of more advanced or pedagogically oriented AI tools remained limited. This suggests that exposure is uneven and primarily driven by personal use rather than structured academic engagement.

2. **Insufficient technological proficiency**

   Participants expressed uncertainty in operating AI tools for instructional purposes. Although many have experimented with AI informally, their usage tends to focus on everyday tasks rather than language-teaching functions. This indicates that technology fluency alone does not translate into instructional competence without systematic guidance and practice.

3. **Limited pedagogical knowledge for AI integration**

   Some trainee teachers lacked confidence in designing lessons that incorporate AI-supported strategies, citing fear of ineffective implementation and inadequate classroom practice during practicum. This supports previous literature noting that pre-service teachers require scaffold opportunities to bridge theory with practical classroom application (Hussein, 2020; Dwivedi et al., 2023).

4. **Language proficiency concerns**

   A minority of trainees noted challenges related to English proficiency, which affected their comprehension of AI interfaces predominantly presented in English. This suggests that linguistic readiness forms an integral component of AI readiness, especially when interpreting AI feedback and instructional input.

Strategies for Enhancing AI Readiness among TESL Trainee Teachers

Desktop research and qualitative data analysis suggest several strategies to strengthen trainee teachers' AI readiness. These recommendations emphasise the need for systematic support at curricular, institutional and personal development levels, aligning with recent advocates for AI-integrated teacher education models (Chan & Tang, 2025; Lodge et al., 2023). These strategies are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7

Strategies for Enhancing AI Readiness of TESL Trainee Teachers

Strategies	Explanation	References
Integrating AI-focused training within Teacher Training Programs	TEIs may conduct structured hands-on workshops and training programmes that familiarise trainee teachers with AI tools such as Grammarly, Duolingo, and ChatGPT, with explicit focus on pedagogical applications in English language teaching.	Bekdemir (2024); Tammets & Ley (2023); Wu et al. (2023)
Adding AI Modules into the TESL Curriculum	Given the increasing inevitability of AI integration in education, TEIs should adopt proactive measures by embedding a dedicated AI pedagogy module within the TESL curriculum. This would provide trainee teachers with essential knowledge of AI technologies and their pedagogical applications, including lesson planning, classroom management, student performance monitoring, and personalised learning strategies.	Banat (2022); Selvam & Zakaria (2024)

Increasing access to AI tools and resources	For AI integration to be meaningful, TEIs must prioritise the provision of sufficient infrastructure, facilities, and access to AI-enabled tools and resources, thereby creating a supportive environment for AI-driven teaching and learning practices.	Arvin et al. (2023); Ayanwale et al. (2022)
Mentorship and guided AI-based practicum	Teaching practicum should be transformed to include structured opportunities for AI application in classroom teaching. This highlights the importance of placing trainee teachers in schools where AI is already utilised in instructional processes, allowing them to acquire hands-on experience and develop confidence in AI-supported pedagogical implementation.	Jafar et al. (2021); Wulandari & Purnamaningwulan (2024)
Encouraging self-directed learning and professional growth	Establishing a culture of self-directed learning within TEIs could motivate trainee teachers to independently explore and experiment with AI tools beyond formal coursework. This should be complemented with opportunities for peer-sharing and collaborative learning, enabling trainees to exchange strategies, troubleshoot challenges collectively, and strengthen AI competency through community-based practice.	Güneyli et al. (2024); Ismail et al. (2024)

Implications for TESL Teacher Education and AI Integration

The overall findings suggest that TESL trainee teachers in Sabah demonstrate emerging readiness toward AI use, particularly in technological familiarity and content exploration (AI-TK and AI-TCK), yet readiness remains limited in pedagogical integration, lesson design, and information literacy competencies. These patterns reflect widespread concerns in teacher preparation literature, where digital familiarity does not automatically translate into instructional proficiency (Celik et al., 2023; Ning et al., 2024). This underscores the need for TEIs to systematically embed AI-based pedagogical competencies into TESL programmes rather than relying on incidental exposure.

A key implication is the necessity for curriculum enhancement. Integrating a dedicated module on AI pedagogy and embedding AI-driven microteaching opportunities could strengthen trainee teachers' capacity to design lessons, evaluate AI output, and apply technology for feedback, assessment, and personalised learning. Workshops, hands-on training, and structured digital practicum placements would allow trainees to move from AI users to AI-assisted practitioners, and eventually as AI-informed instructional decision makers. Language support and scaffolded modelling may also reduce barriers faced by trainees with limited English proficiency when navigating AI platforms.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces AI-TPACK as a meaningful lens for examining AI readiness among language teachers. The results highlight the interdependence between AI-TK, AI-TPK, and AI-TPACK, confirming that technological knowledge alone is insufficient without pedagogical decision-making skills and critical

information literacy. Therefore, AI readiness must be approached holistically, emphasising tool competence, pedagogical design, ethical literacy, and reflective practice.

Future research may extend this work by exploring AI readiness across multiple TEIs, evaluating AI-based practicum interventions, or examining how AI readiness influences student outcomes. Longitudinal studies could identify how AI-TPACK develops over time, while cross-context comparisons may reveal cultural and resource-based differences in AI adoption. Such investigations will contribute to a clearer understanding of how AI can be meaningfully embedded in English language teacher preparation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study reveals that TESL trainee teachers demonstrate higher readiness in technological content-related aspects of AI yet exhibit only moderate competence in AI-related information literacy and pedagogical integration. Understanding the challenges influencing AI readiness such as limited exposure to AI tools, insufficient technological proficiency, and language-related constraints, is essential for designing responsive capacity-building initiatives. Strengthening AI readiness requires TEIs to implement structured interventions, including targeted AI-training programmes, hands-on workshops, curriculum enhancements, and authentic practicum experiences in AI-supported environments. By addressing these gaps, TEIs will be better positioned to prepare future English teachers to meaningfully integrate AI tools into their instructional practices, thereby fostering more personalised, efficient, and innovative approaches to English language teaching and learning.

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4 Integration of AI in Teaching Writing using Malaysian Folklore

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Abstract

This study explores the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in English for Second Language (ESL) classroom writing instruction in Malaysian secondary schools following the COVID-19 pandemic. AI-assisted language learning tools have demonstrated beneficial impact on learners' writing and have enhanced their involvement in these activities. Moreover, AI technologies and techniques can improve writing education and student writing skills, using local folktales as a culturally relevant medium. This study utilised a mixed-method design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The participants consisted of 60 secondary school students in Perak, representing a range of backgrounds and abilities. The study employed two primary instruments: a writing portfolio test and a questionnaire. This study explores how cultural relevance, technological infrastructure, teacher training, and curriculum design influence the successful implementation of AI. It is hoped that this study provides some best practices and guidelines for the integration of AI in culturally diverse educational contexts, with applicability extending beyond Malaysia.

Keywords: Teaching writing, A Iintegration, Malaysian folktales, ESL classroom

Introduction

This study examines the incorporation of Artificial Intelligence in writing instruction, with particular emphasis on the application of folktales in Malaysian secondary schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has prompted a re-evaluation of pedagogical approaches, leading educators to investigate innovative methods for improving student engagement and learning outcomes in writing (Aziz & Baba, 2011).

Writing instruction has historically been fundamental to education; however, it continues to pose significant challenges in effective delivery. Students frequently encounter difficulties with ideation, narrative structuring, vocabulary usage, and sustaining motivation during the writing process. In Malaysia, these challenges are exacerbated by the necessity to

preserve and promote a rich, yet frequently under-utilised, repository of cultural narratives - local folklore. Traditional narratives such as those of Sang Kancil (the clever mousedeer), Puteri Gunung Ledang, and various myths and legends are integral to Malaysia's national identity; however, they face the risk of becoming outdated artifacts for a generation deeply engaged in digital media.

The rapid advancement of AI is increasingly influencing educational sectors, offering both unique opportunities and notable concerns. The concern that artificial intelligence could supplant human creativity and critical thinking is widespread. Alternatively, it is more beneficial to consider AI as a collaborative tool that can augment and enhance human capabilities.

This study presents a pedagogical model designed to tackle these dual challenges. It examines the strategic integration of two AI-powered digital design tools, Writecream and Canva, and their potential to enhance the teaching of narrative writing, with a focus on Malaysian folklore as the primary content. Moreover, this research seeks to identify the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating AI in the teaching of writing using folktales, while also considering the unique cultural and educational landscape of Malaysia (Nhan et al., 2025).

Literature Review

The integration of AI tools in education has significantly transformed pedagogical practices worldwide, particularly in the area of writing instruction. The potential of AI to enhance writing skills in Malaysian secondary schools represents a significant area for research. This literature review examines the current landscape of AI-driven writing tools, focusing on their efficacy, challenges, and implications for educators and students in Malaysia.

The application of AI in education provides personalized learning experiences, automated feedback mechanisms, and opportunities for skill development that were previously unavailable. This review analyses existing research on AI writing tools, focusing on their application in secondary school settings and considering their impact on students' writing proficiency, engagement, and teacher workload.

Artificial intelligence presents various opportunities for the improvement of teaching and learning, including support for language acquisition, research and writing assistance, and professional development for educators (Filiz et al., 2025). AI writing tools offer rapid and equitable feedback, foster independent learning among students, and enhance writing skills (Nhan et al., 2025). Numerous educators are currently employing AI to assist students in

brainstorming and generating ideas (Aziz & Baba, 2011). Advocates contend that, when employed ethically and strategically, AI can serve as a "thinking partner," facilitating the resolution of obstacles, the exploration of ideas, and the refinement of language, thus supporting the writing process for learners across various skill levels. It is crucial to educate students on the limitations, ethical considerations, and proper usage of AI in academic writing to mitigate associated risks. This research examines the integration of AI in writing instruction via folktales within Asian secondary schools, particularly in the Malaysian context following the COVID-19 pandemic. AI-Assisted Language Learning (AIALL) has evolved from traditional Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) by utilising adaptive algorithms to provide personalized and interactive practice. This approach transcends simple repetition, focusing instead on contextualized skill development (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019). Research in local culture and folklore within ESL contexts demonstrates its efficacy in enhancing engagement, cultural competence, and meaningful communication (Shahini, 2025).

The incorporation of particular AI tools such as Writecream and Canva Magic Write exemplifies a practical amalgamation of these fields. Writecream's generative AI aids learners in composing and evaluating narratives rooted in local folklore, offering prompt linguistic feedback. Canva, although not solely an AI platform, frequently integrates AI functionalities (such as Magic Write and design suggestions) that facilitate students in the visual creation and presentation of cultural content, thereby promoting multimodal literacy. This tool-based approach implements theoretical principles: AIALL offers a scaffolded, adaptive environment, whereas local culture provides authentic and motivating content (Xu & Liu, 2025). The integration of these elements enhances language accuracy, creative expression, and digital competency, exemplifying a modern, comprehensive pedagogical approach. Additional research is required to assess the long-term effectiveness and contextual adaptation of these integrated toolkits.

Research in language education highlights the significance of culturally relevant materials in enhancing motivation and facilitating deeper cognitive connections in language acquisition.

The integration of AI tools like Canva Magic Write and Writecream in ESL classrooms introduces innovative pedagogical strategies that enhance writing skill development. These tools utilize generative AI to aid learners in generating ideas, enhancing vocabulary, and producing coherent text (Shahini, 2025). Research on AI-assisted writing underscores its capacity to support learners in the writing process, alleviate anxiety, and offer immediate feedback, which is especially advantageous for ESL students facing language barriers.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How can the AI tools Writecream and Canva be implemented in a classroom environment to facilitate the various stages of the narrative writing process?
2. How does the writing design process in Writecream and Canva support the writing process?
3. Does this AI-integrated technological approach enhance student engagement and improve writing outcomes in the context of Malaysian folklore?

Methodology

This research utilized a mixed-methods, quasi-experimental design to examine the impact of incorporating Malaysian folklore into ESL writing instruction on student engagement and perceived linguistic development. The study was carried out over eight weeks involving two intact groups of upper-secondary ESL students (Form 4) at a public school in Malaysia.

The research focused on secondary schools in Malaysia characterised by diverse student demographics. The participants consisted of 60 secondary school students in Malaysian classroom, representing diverse academic abilities. They (N=60) were divided into a control group (n=30) and an experimental group (n=30). The control group underwent standard process-based writing instruction utilizing conventional, non-cultural prompts. The experimental group was provided with uniform writing process instruction, with all prompts and thematic content sourced from Malaysian folklore, including Hikayat Sang Kancil, legends of Mahsuri, and Puteri Gunung Ledang narratives. Both groups undertook writing tasks using AI tools (Canva Magic Write and Writecream) before and after the intervention for qualitative analysis.

Data collection included survey questions assessing attitudes towards AI and questionnaires to evaluate levels of writing apprehension (Wang, 2024). To measure the effectiveness of AI tools such as Writecream and Canva, a post-intervention survey employing a 5-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree) was administered. The survey assessed constructs of engagement, including interest and motivation, as well as perceived linguistic development, encompassing vocabulary, creativity, and contextual understanding. There were also student writing portfolios based on the basic tools that aid editing and revision. For example, using specific prompts to generate ideas and develop a folklore of their choice.

The data collected was analysed using statistical methods, including descriptive statistics, t-tests, as an intervention on students' writing skills (Nazari et al., 2021). The

quantitative phase went through pre- and post-tests to assess students' writing skills prior to and following the intervention (Song & Song, 2023).

Qualitative data from student writing samples and follow-up focus group interviews with the experimental group were thematically analysed to triangulate findings, exploring how the folklore context influenced writing output and engagement.

Findings

Quantitative analysis of the survey data was conducted based on the constructs of overall s*tudent engagement, creativity stimulation and contextual understanding.* An independent samples t-test was performed to compare the mean scores of the experimental and control groups.

Results of the analysis of the survey data indicated a statistically significant difference in mean scores between the groups. The results of analysis are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Results of survey on student engagement, creativity stimulation and contextual understanding

Survey Construct	Group	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	t-value	p-value
Overall Engagement	Experimental	4.42	0.51	6.87	p < .001
	Control	3.40	0.71		
Stimulates Creativity	Experimental	4.55	0.57	7.21	p < .001
	Control	3.33	0.76		
Enhances Contextual Understanding	Experimental	4.30	0.62	5.92	p < .001
	Control	3.38	0.80		

Note: p < .001 indicates high statistical significance

Analysis of qualitative data from student writing samples and follow-up focus group interviews with the experimental group were thematically analysed to triangulate findings, exploring how the folklore context influenced writing output and engagement. Results of this analysis yielded two key themes: i) idea generation (Brainstorming Partner); ii) ease of writing and meaningful lesson.

Idea generation

The students expressed their opinion that the AI tools helped them in ‘idea generation’ acting as a ‘Brainstorming Partner’. For those struggling with the blank page, Writecream acted as an instant idea fountain. A prompt like *Generate 10 modern settings for a Sang Kancil*

story yielded options from "a polluted city river" to "a hacked smart forest," sparking students' imagination and moving them beyond traditional jungle settings. Below are quotes from two students:

Student 1: “I think writing using AI tools is limiting my creativity because I am only using a few words to express myself and the rest is done by AI. I think that maybe in the future is not good for me because I won’t be thinking much and I will rely on AI to do my work for me.”

Student 2: “I think AI tool is not useful for me because my mind is too slow for it. My mind becomes lazy by using AI because I don’t use my brain to write my story.”

Some students contemplated the utilisation of AI tools to assist with writing mechanics and conventions, including spelling, grammar, and composition (Woo et al., 2025). However, in the qualitative data analysis, a student responded that these tools could lead to excessive dependence on AI tools and may result in diminished critical thinking and originality in writing, as authors might become excessively reliant on the suggestions offered by these tools rather than cultivating their own ideas.

Ease of writing and meaningful lesson

Some students perceived AI tools as valuable sources of inspiration and creativity. These tools served as an initial framework for generating ideas for folklore writing. Additionally, the students explored the use of AI tools to identify various methods for elaborating on these ideas (Song & Song, 2023). Two students made the following observations:

Student 3: “I think that AI tools can enhance our thinking …make the story better. Not only reply it replied to whatever we asked it gave us other options and other alternatives that were useful.”

Student 4: “I think my teacher can make folklore story writing lessons more meaningful for me by teaching us using AI.”

This integration of AI into folklore writing maintains cultural heritage while modernizing writing pedagogy, improving accessibility and engagement for digital-native students. The integration of Malaysian folklore and AI writing tools corresponds with constructivist learning theories, emphasizing that learners actively construct knowledge through meaningful interactions with content technology. Folklore narratives function as prompts or thematic frameworks that AI tools assist in developing into structured written compositions. This integration preserves cultural heritage while modernizing writing pedagogy, enhancing accessibility and engagement for students who are digital natives (Ali et.al, 2025; Huertas-Abril & Palacios-Hidalgo, 2025).

Discussion and Conclusion

The disruption caused by the pandemic has necessitated a re-evaluation of pedagogical approaches, prompting educators to explore innovative methods for enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes in writing (Filiz et al., 2025). This study offers insights into the integration of AI in writing instruction, providing guidance for educators and practitioners on effectively leveraging AI to enhance students' writing skills (Phua et al., 2025). The findings highlight the necessity of thoughtfully evaluating pedagogical strategies and student diversity in the integration of AI-generated text within Malaysian ESL writing classrooms, ensuring equitable benefits for both high-achieving and low-achieving students (Woo et al., 2025). In investigating the effectiveness of AI-driven writing interventions that utilize folktales to enhance students' writing skills, the research findings concur with Aziz & Baba (2011).

The integration of Malaysian folklore and AI writing tools corresponds with constructivist learning theories, emphasizing that learners actively construct knowledge through meaningful interactions with content technology. Folklore narratives function as prompts or thematic frameworks that AI tools assist in developing into structured written compositions.

The application of AI writing assistants in ESL contexts enhances learners' autonomy and confidence. Tools such as Canva Magic Write and Writecream offer customized linguistic suggestions and stylistic alternatives, enabling students to explore language and enhance their writing through iterative refinement. This aligns with current ESL instructional objectives that emphasize learner-centered methodologies and technology-enhanced learning environments.

While the potential advantages are evident, obstacles persist in the effective integration of folklore content with AI tools. These challenges include the necessity of ensuring cultural sensitivity in AI-generated output and achieving a pedagogical equilibrium between the use of technology and the role of teacher guidance. The tools demonstrate significant potential to improve student learning; however, feedback from students indicates concerns regarding their appropriate use and possible adverse effects such as over-reliance on AI. It is essential for educators and parents to assist students in the appropriate, ethical, and fair use of AI tools (Schiel, et al., 2023).

In conclusion, it was found that the majority of students in this study have a positive attitude towards using AI in their writing. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that secondary educational institutions should start introducing the use of AI in the classroom. The

use of artificial AI technologies by students is anticipated to increase, not just in academic settings but also in other contexts.

Further research is required to identify optimal practices for integrating AI in teaching writing to enhance writing skill development in Malaysian ESL classrooms. More research should focus on a more in-depth examination of this issue, specifically the use of AI through qualitative methods, such as interviewing and observing students in academic writing classes while they integrate AI using Malaysian folklore. The research advocates for augmentation rather than replacement. Successful implementation, according to the literature, occurs when the teacher acts as the central orchestrator, utilizing AI for scalable, repetitive tasks such as drills, immediate feedback, and continuous practice. This allows educators to concentrate their expertise on higher-order skills, including critical thinking, cultural nuance, creativity, and empathetic encouragement. The future of effective language learning, according to research, resides in the integration of human-AI partnerships.

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5 Empowering Women through English: A Phenomenological Case Study of Cross-Cultural Virtual Exchange between Indian and Japanese University Students

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Abstract

This study employs a phenomenological case study design and examines English as a communication medium in a virtual cross-cultural exchange between female university students from India and Japan. Using a mixed-methods approach, pre-discussion responses were used to tailor the session to students' preferred topics and activities. Discussions included self-introductions, picture sharing, and guided interactions. Post-discussion qualitative coding revealed five themes: cultural exchange, enjoyment, time constraints, communication challenges, and the need for structured interaction. Despite language gaps, students reported increased confidence in communication and a sense of intercultural connection. The findings highlight how student-informed, low-cost exchanges can foster meaningful English communication across cultures.

Keywords: Virtual exchange, cross-cultural communication, phenomenology, student confidence, cultural awareness

Introduction

Cross-cultural communication is essential for students preparing to work and live in today's globalized environments (Fedj, 2019). It develops motivation and professional growth, particularly for women who have historically faced barriers to opportunities. In contexts like Japan, where international influences are increasing, and India, with its multilingual setting, exposure to cultural differences is vital for learners' growth. English, functioning as a global bridge language, is central to these interactions, serving both native and non-native speakers. India's multilingual and Japan's bilingual practices highlight the importance of communication beyond textbooks (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023; Tasaki, 2020). As Zhong et al. (2024) note, pedagogy must foster intercultural respect and understanding. Although more women are accessing higher education globally, disparities persist, making English a tool for empowerment and upward mobility in male-dominated academic fields. The pandemic further

normalized virtual exchanges, which provide real-life communication opportunities that build confidence and intercultural sensitivity.

This study, under the Global Lingua Pathways Initiative, connected women university students in Japan and India through informal English-mediated discussions aimed at cultural sharing and confidence building. While Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and similar programs have expanded, most research focuses on Western contexts, with limited studies in Asia. Niitsu et al. (2023) explored U.S.–Japan COIL, but comprehensive analyses across Asian nations remain absent. The sociolinguistic realities of India and Japan differ, yet little is known about how women in these contexts experience virtual exchange or navigate gender-based participation. This study addresses that gap, examining reflections from Indian and Japanese students after a cross-cultural discussion. While Japan has a structured approach to English learning, students often lack confidence due to shyness and embarrassment, making real interaction with peers crucial. Virtual exchanges allow authentic practice, mistakes in safe spaces, and respectful cultural navigation, while offering women learners opportunities to challenge norms and take leadership in conversation.

The primary purpose of this study is to explore how female students reflected on their confidence, communication comfort, cultural awareness, and personal learning after the virtual session. Studying pre- and post-discussion perceptions offers insights into the role of cross-cultural exchanges in language learning and in building confidence.

This study adopts a phenomenological lens to explore female students' lived experiences as they reflected on their confidence, communication comfort, cultural awareness, and learning after participating in the English-mediated virtual exchange. The following questions guide the research:

1. How do Indian and Japanese female students perceive their confidence and comfort in communicating in English before and after a virtual cross-cultural discussion?
2. What cultural interests and awareness do these students express before and after participating in the discussion?
3. What factors do the students identify as making the discussion comfortable or challenging?
4. What goals, impacts, or suggestions do the students report after participating in the cross-cultural discussion?

Literature Review

Cross-cultural communication is increasingly recognized as essential for students preparing to enter international workplaces, where both language skills and cultural adaptability are required (Anggraeni, 2019; Wu, 2023). Women often face additional challenges in participation and public speaking, making intercultural learning opportunities particularly valuable. Virtual exchange (VE) and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) programs have emerged as powerful tools to foster intercultural competence, language development, and global citizenship (Arumita, 2023; Jin Young Hwang, 2024). By connecting learners across borders, these programs cultivate inclusivity and prepare students for multicultural professional environments.

Research shows that COIL fosters collaboration and skills needed for global contexts (Grover et al., 2025; Manresa & Prince, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of such programs, offering an alternative to traditional study-abroad initiatives (Whatley et al., 2022, 2025). Beyond mobility, they provide students with intercultural awareness (Okumura, 2024), stronger English proficiency and digital skills (Higgins, 2024), and a broader sense of global citizenship (Garizurieta-Bernabe & Prakaschandra, 2024). Women, in particular, benefit from these spaces where they can voice opinions in intercultural dialogues. O'Dowd (2021) highlights that the focus of VE has expanded beyond language learning to digital and intercultural competencies. Inspired by these developments, initiatives like Global Lingua Pathways aim to adapt COIL to multilingual contexts such as India and Japan.

English serves as the main medium of communication (EMC) in such programs, but local linguistic influences shape pronunciation, comprehension, and communication styles. Research shows that accent familiarity plays a strong role in understanding (Jain et al., 2022; Waterbury, 2000; Shin et al., 2021), and cultural background can shift meanings even when the same words are used (Matsuki et al., 2021). Indian students, exposed to English from an early age, tend to be more confident, while Japanese students often hesitate due to shyness and fear of mistakes, despite strong written skills. As Zhou (2021) emphasizes, cultural identity shapes broader communicative behaviors, and educators must deliberately build intercultural competence into teaching practices (Byram, 2021).

Despite the growing literature, most studies still emphasize Eurocentric or Western exchanges (Dalsky & Su, 2023; Mitchell & Suransky, 2024). Few explore interactions between non-native speakers in Asia, particularly between India and Japan, where students learn English within different sociolinguistic realities. Even less is known about how women reflect on their experiences in such contexts. As Whatley et al. (2022) argue, without explicit attention

to equity, students may continue to face barriers in virtual exchange. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the reflections of Indian and Japanese female university students, providing insights into the challenges and opportunities of English-mediated intercultural dialogue.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The present study is grounded in a multidimensional view of language learning that extends beyond linguistic proficiency to encompass emotional, cognitive, and intercultural dimensions of learner development. This approach is informed by three central theoretical pillars Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory (1997), and Byram's Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) framework (1997, expanded in Nemouchi & Byram, 2025) which collectively illuminate the mechanisms through which confidence in English emerges and evolves within English-Medium Instruction (EMI) and virtual exchange environments.

Affective Foundations: Lowering Barriers to Participation

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis provides the conceptual anchor for understanding the emotional precursors to language engagement. According to Krashen, affective variables, particularly anxiety, confidence, and motivation, either facilitate or obstruct the intake of comprehensible input. Learners with high anxiety tend to avoid communicative risks, thereby limiting opportunities for linguistic development. In the current study, this dynamic was visible in the initial hesitation and self-consciousness exhibited by Japanese participants, in contrast to the comparatively higher speaking confidence displayed by Indian participants with greater cumulative English exposure. Crucially, structured peer interaction during virtual exchange sessions functioned as an affective scaffold, reducing anxiety, normalizing ambiguity, and enabling previously reluctant speakers to engage with unfamiliar communicative demands. This reduction in affective barriers constitutes the first step in the confidence spiral.

Cognitive Agency: From Belief to Behavior

Where Krashen identifies the emotional conditions for learning, Bandura (1997) explains how learners translate those affective conditions into purposeful action. Self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to perform specific tasks, acts as a motivational engine that determines effort, resilience, and willingness to communicate. In this study, learners' growing confidence was empirically traced through pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, which

revealed increased self-perceptions of competence in concrete communicative events, such as introductions, turn-taking, cultural explanations, and opinion sharing. As students experienced incremental successes, they recalibrated their self-evaluations, transitioning from passive recipients of English knowledge to active users of English as a communicative resource. This shift from linguistic accuracy-oriented anxiety to message-focused fluency underscores the cognitive reorientation facilitated by heightened self-efficacy.

Cultural Mediation: English as Identity Work

However, confidence in English is not solely a psychological or linguistic artefact; it is also a socio-cultural construction. Byram's ICC framework situates language learning within the realm of identity, positioning communicative competence as inherently intercultural. ICC encompasses attitudes of curiosity, empathy, and openness; knowledge of cultural practices; and skills for interpreting and mediating perspectives. In the present study, virtual exchanges served as an embodied space in which learners negotiated cultural meanings, compared traditions, and constructed shared narratives. These dialogic encounters repositioned English not as an external academic requirement but as a symbolic tool for belonging, relationality, and global participation. O'Dowd (2021) argues that virtual intercultural exchanges transform language from transactional code to social praxis, a claim substantiated here through students' metacognitive reflections and behavior.

The ACIS Conceptual Model

The Affective–Cognitive–Intercultural Spiral (ACIS) Model of Confidence Development (see Figure 1) integrates the emotional, linguistic, and cultural dimensions of language learning into a unified, upward-moving developmental trajectory. Rather than viewing confidence in English as increasing in a straightforward linear sequence, the ACIS model views it as an emergent, recursive process that evolves as learners repeatedly participate in communicative events, negotiate meaning, and experience success. Each layer of the model performs a distinct function, and the cumulative interactions among layers produce a spiral effect that gradually elevates learners' confidence beyond mere language proficiency.

1. Affective Layer: Emotional Preconditions for Engagement

↓ Anxiety │ ↑ Self-Efficacy (Krashen, 1982; Bandura, 1997)

The foundational layer of the model emphasizes affective factors that shape learners' psychological willingness to participate in English communication. Drawing on Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, high anxiety or fear of negative evaluation can block learners' access to comprehensible input and silence their participation. Conversely, Bandura's concept

of self-efficacy highlights how belief in one's communicative ability encourages risk-taking and persistence. When anxiety is reduced and self-efficacy rises, often through supportive peer interaction, structured tasks, and positive feedback, learners feel emotionally ready to speak, listen, experiment with language, and tolerate ambiguity. This affective readiness initiates the upward movement of the spiral.

2. Cognitive Layer: From Readiness to Action

EMI Engagement & Language Use

Once affective barriers are lowered, learners become cognitively willing and able to process, apply, and manipulate language in real-time communication. The EMI (English-Medium Instruction) environment provides authentic contexts in which learners must use English to access academic content, share opinions, and negotiate meaning. At this stage, emotional readiness crystallizes into behavioral engagement, as learners participate more frequently, attempt more complex speech, and refine their communicative strategies. Cognitive involvement strengthens linguistic competence and discourse management skills, supporting language use that is purposeful rather than performative. Thus, affective dispositions are transformed into tangible linguistic behavior.

3. Cultural Layer: Communication as Social and Identity Work

Virtual Exchange → Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997; O'Dowd, 2021)

The third layer recognizes that confidence does not reach maturity until it becomes embedded in intercultural understanding. Through virtual exchanges, learners encounter diverse perspectives that require them to interpret cultural meanings, explain their own identities, and mediate differences. These experiences cultivate elements of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), including curiosity, empathy, perspective-taking, and tolerance of diversity. At this level, English shifts from being a strictly academic language to a symbolic resource for belonging, relationship-building, and global participation. Learners thus acquire not only linguistic forms but also the sociocultural dexterity needed to communicate across borders.

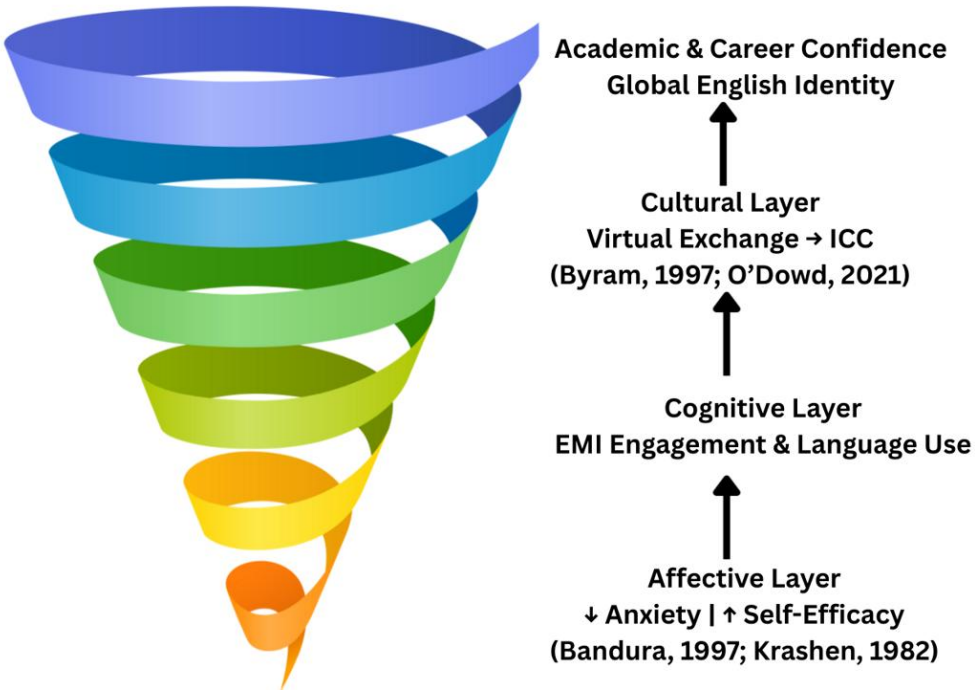
The cumulative progression through the affective, cognitive, and cultural layers results in Academic and Career Confidence, a readiness to engage in English-mediated academic, professional, and international contexts. As learners continually move upward through the spiral, they begin to construct a Global English Identity: an identity no longer anchored solely in their national linguistic background but grounded in their ability to participate meaningfully in global discourse. This identity equips them for mobile, transnational futures, where English functions not merely as a subject to be learned but as a platform for agency, opportunity, and self-representation.

Framework Significance

The ACIS framework, as shown in Figure 1, reconceptualizes English confidence as a spiraling developmental process that unfolds through emotional deregulation, cognitive empowerment, and intercultural engagement. It challenges traditional skill-based views of EMI by demonstrating that proficiency alone does not produce confident global communicators; instead, confidence emerges from the interplay of psychological safety, communicative agency, and intercultural legitimacy. In doing so, the framework provides a theoretically robust and pedagogically actionable lens for understanding how virtual exchanges can serve as catalysts for linguistic empowerment, epistemic access, and global identity formation among women learners in Asian EMI contexts.

Figure 1

Affective-Cognitive-Intercultural Spiral (ACIS) Model of Confidence Development



Research Methodology

Research Design

This study followed a phenomenological case study design. This aims to explore the lived experiences of Indian and Japanese university students participating in a cross-cultural English-mediated virtual discussion. The primary goal was to allow students to experience real-world communication in a relaxed, mistake-friendly environment rather than focusing on measuring scores or testing knowledge; It was believed that creating a stress-free atmosphere

would enable students to perform more naturally and meaningfully engage in the discussion. The virtual exchange was conducted as a one-time event in January 2025, with plans to develop it into a recurring initiative with multiple sessions.

Research Context: The Global Lingua Pathways Virtual Exchange

The virtual cross-cultural discussion explored in this study was organized under the Global Lingua Pathways initiative to foster English communication skills and cultural awareness among non-native English-speaking students. The event was held via Zoom in January 2025 and brought together approximately 10 undergraduate students from India and 20 from Japan. Participation was voluntary and independent of students' formal academic courses. The primary aim was to provide a real-world communication experience, encouraging students to interact in English in a relaxed, friendly setting beyond traditional classroom environments. The students were oriented to potential cultural differences they might encounter when conversing and reminded to act politely and cautiously to understand them better. This orientation to cultural differences was prepared before the session to better understand them. Activities during the session included ice-breaking questions and discussions about student life, cultural differences, hobbies, and daily routines, all conducted in English and ascertained from pre-questionnaire discussion. The session emphasized the importance of appreciating diverse English accents, communication styles, and cultural perspectives by connecting students from multilingual and bilingual societies. This case study focuses on students' reflections and experiences from participating in this virtual exchange.

Participants

The participants in this study included approximately 10 undergraduate female students from India and 20 from Japan. The selection was based on student availability, as participation was voluntary and not tied to any specific academic course. The Japanese students came from various majors and were enrolled in English language classes, studying English primarily as a foreign language (EFL). In contrast, the Indian students were more familiar with using English as a second language (ESL) in their academic settings. The participants were aged 18-20, representing a typical undergraduate demographic. The Indian students were enrolled in undergraduate programs in arts and social sciences and were accustomed to using English as an academic medium in coursework, enabling smoother participation during the session.

Data Collection

Data were collected using Microsoft Forms, distributed to students before and after the virtual session. The pre-discussion questionnaire focused on students' expectations, preferences for discussion activities, and self-assessed confidence levels regarding English communication. The post-discussion questionnaire explored students' reflections on their experiences, changes in confidence and communication comfort, and cultural insights gained during the session. All questionnaires were completed anonymously, with no personal identifiers collected. The forms included a combination of Likert-scale items, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended prompts designed to gather both structured and narrative data.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using MAXQDA. Codes and subcodes were manually created based on recurring themes and student expressions. The analysis focused primarily on thematic categorization of experiences related to confidence, cultural awareness, discussion comfort, and personal goals or suggestions for improvement. Light quantitative analysis was also incorporated through simple frequency counts and percentage calculations to support the qualitative findings, particularly for Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines were carefully followed throughout the study. Students were informed about the project's purpose and participated voluntarily. Before completing the questionnaires, participants provided informed consent by acknowledging that their responses would be collected anonymously and used solely for research purposes. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study, and no identifying information was linked to any responses.

Analysis and Findings

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the students from both India and Japan. In the Indian group, the majority were first-year students (50%), while in Japan, most participants were second-year students. Regarding English proficiency, around 50% of Indian students rated their skills as "Good," and 40% as "Average." Among Japanese students, 60% rated themselves as "Good," with another 20% reporting "Very Good" proficiency. Regarding cross-cultural experience, over 70% of Indian students reported having prior exposure, whereas only 30% of Japanese students did. These differences may have influenced both confidence and cultural familiarity during the exchange.

Table 1

Participant profile summary – India and Japan

Category	Option	India (%)	Japan (%)
Year of Study	First Year	50	30
	Second Year	30	50
	Third Year	20	20
English Proficiency	Very Good	10	20
	Good	50	60
	Average	40	20
Cross-Cultural Experience	Yes	30	70
	No	70	30

Tables 2A and 2B highlight students' cultural curiosity, willingness to share, and confidence in English communication. Both Indian and Japanese students showed strong interest in cultural exchange, with 79% of Japanese and 72% of Indian students expressing curiosity, and 68% and 64% willing to share, respectively. While Indian students gave more "strongly agree" responses in sharing, Japanese students showed slightly higher neutrality (16%), and unexpectedly, 21% of Indian students strongly disagreed with curiosity and sharing compared to just 5–10% of Japanese, possibly due to cultural factors or sample size. Confidence patterns showed clearer differences: Indian students consistently reported higher confidence across group discussions, introductions, cultural exchanges, and idea-sharing, with up to 71% feeling "very confident," while no Japanese students selected this response. Instead, 73% of Japanese students reported being "not confident" in group discussions and in explaining ideas. These findings suggest both groups were open to cultural dialogue, but Indian students' greater exposure to English in higher education contributed to stronger confidence, whereas Japanese students remained more reserved in communication contexts.

Table 2A

Cultural Curiosity and Willingness to Share

Statements	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
I am curious to learn about other cultures.	Japan: 15 India: 43	Japan: 64 India: 29	Japan: 16 India: 7	Japan: 0 India: 0	Japan:5 India: 21
I would like to share my own culture.	Japan: 10 India: 21	Japan: 58 India: 43	Japan: 22 India: 15	Japan: 0 India: 0	Japan: 10 India: 21

Table 2B

Confidence in Communication

Situation	Very Confident (%)	Somewhat Confident (%)	Not Confident (%)
Speaking English during group discussions	Japan: 0 India: 64	Japan: 27 India: 36	Japan: 73 India: 0
Introducing yourself to a new group	Japan: 16 India: 71	Japan: 48 India: 29	Japan: 36 India: 0
Talking about cultural differences	Japan: 0 India: 57	Japan: 36 India: 36	Japan: 64 India: 7
Explaining your ideas in English	Japan: 0 India: 71	Japan: 27 India: 29	Japan: 73 India: 0

Table 3A

Confidence in Communication

Discussion Topic	Country	Rank 1 (%)	Rank 2 (%)	Rank 3 (%)	Rank 4 (%)	Rank 5 (%)	Total
Daily student life	India	42	31	11	16	0	100
Food and recipes	India	32	26	16	5	21	100
Career goals	India	16	16	26	5	37	100
Festivals and traditions	India	5	21	21	37	16	100
Technology and hobbies	India	5	5	26	37	27	100

Table 3A shows how Indian students ranked their interest in five discussion topics prior to the virtual exchange. A majority (42%) ranked *Daily student life* as their top choice, followed by *Food and recipes* (32%) and *Career goals* (16%). Topics like *Festivals and traditions*, Technology, *and hobbies* received fewer top ranks, with higher percentages appearing in Rank 4 and 5. This indicates that Indian students preferred conversational topics related to their daily routines and practical experiences over more abstract or technical themes

Table 3B

Japanese Students' Ranked Preferences for Virtual Discussion Topics (%)

Discussion Topic	Country	Rank 1 (%)	Rank 2 (%)	Rank 3 (%)	Rank 4 (%)	Rank 5 (%)	Total
Daily student life	Japan	52	32	0	16	0	100
Food and recipes	Japan	10	37	26	11	16	100
Festivals and traditions	Japan	10	10	37	32	11	100
Technology and hobbies	Japan	10	11	37	31	11	100
Career goals	Japan	16	5	5	21	53	100

In Table 3B Japanese students clearly preferred *Daily student life*, with 52% ranking it as their top topic. Food and recipes and Festivals and traditions followed closely, receiving a spread of responses across the top three ranks. Interestingly, *Career goals* received the highest Rank 5th (53%), indicating relatively low interest in this theme during the cross-cultural exchange. This may reflect cultural tendencies toward humility or discomfort when discussing future ambitions in group settings. Overall, the Japanese students leaned toward familiar, lifestyle-based topics rather than personal or career-oriented discussions.

Table 4

Preferred Activity Types for Cross-Cultural Discussion (India & Japan)

Activity Type	India (%)	Japan (%)
Fun games or quizzes	31	35
Simple questions and answers	33	27
Sharing pictures/videos	26	22
Role-playing conversations	10	16
Total	100	100

Table 4 presents the percentage distribution of students' preferred discussion activities in the virtual exchange session. The most preferred activity for both Indian and Japanese students was "Fun games or quizzes," selected by 37% of Japanese and 33% of Indian students. "Simple questions and answers" ranked second for both groups, with 29% of Indian students and 29% of Japanese students showing interest, suggesting a shared preference for

easy, low-pressure formats. Interestingly, "Sharing pictures/videos" was more popular among Indian students (26%) than Japanese students (23%), while "Role-playing conversations" had the least preference among both groups—particularly low among Indian students (10%) and slightly higher in Japan (17%). These results indicate that students across both cultures tend to prefer interactive yet simple activities, with less interest in complex or performance-based formats like role-play.

Table 5

Post-Discussion Student Feedback

Question	Response Option	All Students (%)
1. How would you rate the overall session?	Excellent	51
	Good	32
	Neutral	8
	Needs improvement	8
	Total	100
2. Was the picture-sharing activity helpful?	Very helpful	70
	Somewhat helpful	24
	Not helpful	5
	Total	100
3. How easy was it to communicate with others?	Very easy	27
	Somewhat easy	41
	Difficult	32
	Total	100
4. Did you feel comfortable sharing your culture?	Very comfortable	70
	Somewhat comfortable	24
	Not comfortable	5
	Total	100
5. Would you participate in a future session?	Yes	86
	Maybe	14
	No	0`
	Total	100
6. What was your favorite part of the session?	Asking and answering questions	30
	Picture sharing	25
	Learning about different cultures	25
	Making new friends	20
	Total	100

Table 5 shows that the students responded positively to the virtual cross-cultural exchange, with 51% rating it as “excellent” and 32% as “good,” indicating a strong overall impact. The picture-sharing activity was particularly effective, with 70% finding it “very helpful” for understanding the other culture, highlighting the value of visual engagement. Communication, however, remained a challenge: only 27% found it “very easy” to talk with peers from other countries, while 32% reported difficulties, reflecting ongoing issues with spoken English and intercultural expression. Despite this, 70% felt “very comfortable” sharing their own culture, suggesting the session created a safe and respectful environment. Importantly, 86% expressed interest in future sessions, showing that students valued the opportunity to connect across cultures despite language or technical barriers. When asked what they found most meaningful, 30% chose asking and answering questions, followed by picture sharing and cultural learning (25% each), and 20% highlighted making new friends, underscoring the session’s success in fostering both cultural understanding and interpersonal connections.

Post-Discussion Thematic Insights

Table 6 presents a thematic summary of students’ reflections, showing five main themes from the virtual cross-cultural exchange.

Table 6

Thematic Summary from Post-Discussion Reflections

Theme	Description	Frequency (%)
Positive Cultural Exchange and Friendship	Students appreciated interacting across cultures and making new friends.	41
Joy and Fun	Participants expressed enjoyment and excitement throughout the session.	24
Desire for More Time and Frequent Interaction	Many wished the session were longer or happened more regularly.	15
Need for Structured Turn-Taking and Better Technical Setup	Students noted difficulties with audio or unclear turn-taking during discussions.	12
English Communication Challenges	A few reported struggling with English language fluency or confidence.	7

As shown in Table 6, the most frequent theme, Positive Cultural Exchange and Friendship (41%), highlights students' enthusiasm to connect internationally, with comments such as, "I could learn about India this time," and "It felt like talking to friends rather than strangers." Joy and Fun (24%) reflected the emotional excitement, with many describing the session as "fun," "exciting," and even "magical." A further 15% stressed the Need for More Time and Frequent Interaction, wishing for longer sessions and broader topics. In comparison, 12% noted the Need for Structured turn-taking and Better Technical Setup, pointing to overlapping audio and awkward silences, suggesting clearer speaking roles and improved sound management. Finally, English Communication Issues (7%) showed some students felt limited by their language skills. However, they still valued the chance to interact, with one saying, "I could not speak smoothly, but I really enjoyed it." Together, these reflections underline the value of virtual exchanges in fostering intercultural friendships, joy, motivation, and language practice, while also offering practical suggestions for more inclusive and effective future sessions.

Limitations

A balanced interpretation of the study is reflected in its limitations. The key limitation of this cross-cultural communication virtual exchange is the small sample size, which could compromise the data's reliability and depth. Another limitation is participants' varying levels of English proficiency, particularly among the Japanese students, as some responded to open-ended questions with brief or incomplete phrases, thereby reducing the overall value of the qualitative insights. The quality of interaction was also affected by one-sided communication, time constraints, limited audio settings, and biased turn-taking, all of which reduced student enjoyment and engagement. Additionally, qualitative data collection and analysis were conducted by a single researcher, making subjectivity unavoidable, whereas involving multiple researchers in coding would have enhanced reliability. To address these gaps in future studies, it is important to aim for a larger, more representative sample, engage students more in pre- and post-discussion activities, and provide structured support through role assignments, assistance for less confident speakers, and multilingual guidance to ensure inclusivity. Implementing these suggestions, along with involving multiple coders, will improve understanding of cross-cultural communication practices in virtual academic settings.

Discussion

The study revealed key outcomes regarding students' confidence, cultural awareness, and the challenges they face. Initially, Indian students reported higher comfort levels in English use, while none of the Japanese students described themselves as “very confident”; however, post-discussion data showed significant improvement, with about 70% of all students feeling “very comfortable” sharing their culture in English and 24% “somewhat comfortable.” Comments like “I could not speak smoothly, but I enjoyed it” illustrate how supportive environments reduce anxiety and boost participation (Habsy et al., 2023). Similarly, fostering cultural awareness encouraged curiosity: 25% cited “learning about other cultures” as their favourite aspect, and over 80% expressed comfort sharing their own. Students described the session as “fun,” “interesting,” and “thrilling,” showing how hesitant learners gained confidence and saw English as a tool for communication rather than just a subject. This aligns with intercultural communicative competence frameworks (Nemouchi & Byram, 2025) and earlier findings emphasizing cultural awareness and active participation (Tilovatova, 2024). While some challenges arose, such as audio interference, technical issues, and overlapping voices, only 12% mentioned these as difficulties, and students still strongly wished to participate again, echoing the need to address infrastructural and temporal barriers for successful COIL implementation (Huang & Lanford, 2024).

Overall, students’ reflections and researchers' observations highlight the pedagogical value of such exchanges. More than 70% rated the session as “good” or “excellent,” with 86% expressing interest in future participation. However, some participants requested longer sessions or clearer roles to facilitate turn-taking. Research confirms that learner satisfaction improves when exchanges are structured, collaborative, and autonomy-driven (Tran et al., 2024). For the facilitator, this session provided a meaningful departure from scripted textbook practices, showing that, when placed in an informal, non-judgmental environment, even the quietest students contribute. Watching students smile, nod, and connect across cultural boundaries reinforced the objective of using English as a tool for communication and friendship rather than perfection. The session demonstrated that virtual exchanges offer authentic, inclusive opportunities for intercultural learning, affirming the importance of creating more such real-life communication spaces where language may be imperfect, but the intent to connect remains sincere.

Conclusion

This study examined how Indian and Japanese university students felt about using English as the medium of communication during a virtual cross-cultural exchange. Initially, Indian students appeared more confident, especially in speaking, while Japanese students were reserved and hesitant to talk. Nevertheless, by the end of the session, many Japanese students said they felt more comfortable and open, showing that even brief, relaxed interactions can ease their fear of speaking English. Indian students played an important role in making the conversation glide smoothly. Their experience using English in multilingual settings helped them encourage others and make participation easier.

Students from both countries appreciated sharing their culture and learning about each other. Many others have also noted that they would like to participate in more such sessions. Although there were a few technical or communication difficulties, they did not affect the overall positive outcome of the session. The exception has helped the students to go beyond textbook learning and experience authentic, meaningful communication. This session has also helped build mutual respect, showing that English is not just an academic subject but also a tool for connecting people across borders. Overall, the session has highlighted how virtual discussions can create rich, real-life experiences that can make language learning or use more natural and inclusive.

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6 Mentoring Without a Map: How Leadership Shapes Language Teacher Identity in ESL Programs

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Abstract

In many ESL programs, experienced teachers are expected to assume leadership practices without structural clarity. This study investigates how leadership practices influence language teacher identity, particularly in systems where leadership roles are based more on seniority. Based on thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 8 ESL teachers, the study reveals that when leadership responsibilities are ambiguous or unsupported, even well-meaning leaders may resist innovation, revert to outdated practices, and fail to provide instructional guidance. These dynamics, in turn, shape how teachers perceive their roles, authority, and agency in the classroom. The Peter Principle (Peter & Hull, 1969) is used as a diagnostic frame to explain how the assumption that strong teaching equates to leadership readiness may inadvertently result in instructional stagnation. The findings highlight how leadership practices can distort or constrain the identity development of English teachers. Implications include rethinking leadership support structures in ESL contexts.

Keywords: Language teacher identity, leadership practices, Peter Principle, ESL education

Introduction

Despite CEFR-aligned reforms, Malaysian ESL classrooms continue to face systemic and pedagogical challenges. National evaluations, including the Cambridge Baseline Report (2013) highlight persistent gaps, especially in speaking (Cambridge Assessment English, 2018). In PISA 2022, only 42% of Malaysian students met the minimum reading benchmark, compared to the OECD average of 74% (OECD, 2023). These gaps are especially pronounced in rural and under-resourced schools, where inequities in access, exposure, and support persist (Renganathan, 2023).

Policy framing remains largely utilitarian. English is positioned as an academic and economic asset in national documents like the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025), sidelining its identity-forming and affective dimensions. Such framing reduces English language teaching to technical training, stripping it of cultural significance (Loh & Liew, 2016).

School culture reinforces this narrow orientation. Teaching remains exam-oriented, textbook-driven, and teacher-fronted (Alih et al., 2021; Swaran Singh et al., 2021). Dialogic teaching is rare, and classroom discourse remains teacher-dominated (Hardman & A-

Rahman, 2014). Initiatives like School-Based Assessment (SBA) often devolve into procedural compliance rather than reflective practice, feeding a performative culture where innovation is risky and process is eclipsed by measurable outcomes (Nawai & Said, 2020; Rashid et al., 2017).

In this environment, middle leaders are tasked with mentoring peers, leading PD, and coordinating curriculum, yet often without structural support, role clarity, or leadership training. Leadership appointments are still largely seniority-based, reinforcing the idea that experience substitutes for vision (Bush et al., 2018; Norwawi, 2021). As a result, many middle leaders hold symbolic titles with little influence on instructional quality.

Leadership development remains reactive. Malaysia only formalised principal preparation in 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2013; Nor & Razak, 2021), and many leaders still receive training post-appointment (Ahmad & Boon, 2011). Though national reforms endorse instructional and distributed leadership, implementation at the middle level remains patchy. Many middle leaders operate with vague responsibilities and limited authority (Bush, 2019). While instructional leadership is endorsed in principle, it is undermined by unclear role expectations, workload conflicts, and doubts about initiatives like National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL) (Bush et al., 2018).

This ambiguity reinforces status-based rather than practice-based leadership. The results mirror the Peter Principle (Peter & Hull, 1969): promotions based on tenure rather than competence lead to stagnation. Unprepared leaders often default to managerial tasks, resist pedagogical change, or micromanage, especially in hierarchical systems. These dynamics narrow the space for teacher agency, professional dialogue, and identity formation (Aziz et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2016). Although teacher identity has been widely examined, its intersection with middle leadership remains underexplored. Existing studies typically focus on principals or treat identity as a static personal trait rather than a product of institutional and relational conditions. This study addresses that gap by examining how middle leadership influences Language Teacher Identity (LTI) in Malaysian ESL classrooms.

Research Questions

The research questions are postulated as follows:

RQ: How do middle leadership practices influence English teachers' language teacher identity in Malaysian ESL classrooms?

RQ1a: How do ESL teachers interpret the practices of their middle leaders?

RQ1b: How do middle leadership practices impact language teacher identity?

Literature Review

Malaysia's national education policies consistently position school leaders as central to instructional reform. Documents such as the English Language Education Reform Roadmap 2015–2025, Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025), and the National Digital Education Policy (2023) call for distributed leadership models, reflective practice, teacher autonomy, and digital integration to support CEFR-aligned teaching. Within this vision, middle leaders are expected to function not only as administrative coordinators but also as pedagogical mentors and change agents capable of aligning classroom practice with evolving policy demands. However, the translation of these expectations into school-level practice remains fraught with ambiguity. Institutional cultures, uneven capacity-building efforts, and the dominance of compliance-driven assessment practices continue to limit the instructional impact of middle leadership. Moreover, the complex role of middle leaders raises important questions about how such leadership shapes teachers' professional identity, particularly in Malaysian ESL contexts. Hence, this literature review critically examines three core areas: leadership practices, the conceptualisation of Language Teacher Identity (LTI), and the relevance of the Peter Principle as a diagnostic lens for understanding leadership mismatches in education.

Leadership Practices

Globally, school leadership is increasingly understood as a multifaceted, context-sensitive construct shaped by policy expectations and organisational cultures (De Nobile, 2018; Dinham, 2007). Three dominant paradigms frame the discourse: transformational leadership, which focuses on capacity building and motivation (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982); distributed leadership, which conceptualises leadership as a collective practice (Harris et al., 2019; Spillane, 2005); and instructional leadership, which prioritises teaching quality, curriculum direction, and goal-setting (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Scholars now advocate for hybrid models that integrate these approaches to address complex school realities, with middle leaders serving as key intermediaries who translate policy into practice, mentor peers, and promote pedagogical coherence (Thien et al., 2023).

In Malaysia, however, these global models are only partially enacted. Although the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025) identifies school leaders, particularly Heads of Department (HoDs), subject coordinators, and senior assistants, as instructional leaders, implementation remains largely administrative and hierarchical (Nor & Razak, 2021). Middle leaders are tasked with curriculum planning, assessment management, and teacher development, yet often lack clear role definitions, decision-making authority, and structured

leadership training (Nobile et al., 2024; Tang, 2023). Consequently, leadership practice tends to be allocative rather than developmental, oriented more toward bureaucratic compliance than pedagogical growth. These structural and cultural constraints undermine middle leaders' agency and limit their influence on teacher identity, motivation, and innovation in instructional practice.

Language Teacher Identity

Language Teacher Identity (LTI) refers to how teachers perceive their professional roles within the sociocultural, institutional, and policy contexts they navigate (Beijaard et al., 2004; Fairley, 2020). It is a dynamic construct shaped through daily interactions with students, colleagues, school leaders, and broader reform agendas (Varghese et al., 2005). Coldron and Smith (1999) conceptualise identity as a negotiation between personal agency and institutional constraints. However, in systems where standardisation, performativity, and compliance dominate, this space for self-location and agency is often diminished.

Globally, English language teachers frequently encounter identity tensions due to top-down reforms, high-stakes testing, and pedagogical misalignments (De Costa & Norton, 2017). These tensions, if unresolved, can lead to frustration, moral conflict, or burnout. Mahmoodarabi et al. (2021) reinforce that LTI is multifaceted and deeply situated as it is not only emotional or cognitive but shaped by institutional logics, language ideologies, and professional cultures that either enable or constrain growth.

In Malaysia, such tensions are intensified by structural and cultural factors. English is predominantly framed as a utilitarian tool for exams and economic advancement, rather than a medium for expression or identity formation (Loh & Liew, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2015). This instrumental view, embedded in policy documents like the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025), marginalises the affective, humanistic dimensions of English language teaching (Loh & Liew, 2016). Teachers are thus expected to produce measurable outcomes while having limited influence over pedagogy or curriculum.

The culture of performativity, rooted in exam-orientation, textbook adherence, and rigid assessment practices, further narrows teachers' space for creativity or agency (Alih et al., 2021; Hardman & A-Rahman, 2014). This environment often isolates teachers and diminishes professional motivation, particularly among NNESTs who must continually negotiate the legitimacy of their linguistic and pedagogical capital (De Costa & Norton, 2017). Where instructional leadership is weak or overly hierarchical, LTI remains unsupported, increasing the risk of teacher attrition and disengagement (Amzat et al., 2021; Ooi & Othman, 2023). In contrast, schools that actively support teacher identity, through mentoring, reflective dialogue,

or leadership that encourages agency, help teachers build confidence, resilience, and commitment to the profession (Grootenboer, 2018).

Exploring Leadership Limitations through the Peter Principle

The Peter Principle (Peter & Hull, 1969) posits that individuals are often promoted based on past performance until they reach roles beyond their competence. Though rooted in organisational psychology, this principle offers a valuable diagnostic lens for understanding leadership misalignment in Malaysian ESL schools. Middle leadership positions, such as Head of Department, are frequently awarded based on seniority rather than instructional expertise or leadership acumen (Nor & Razak, 2021). In the absence of systematic leadership preparation, this results in middle leaders who lack the pedagogical vision or interpersonal skills required to support teacher development effectively (Bush, 2019). The consequence is often surface-level management, diminished instructional coherence, and weakened support structures. Simulation studies done by Pluchino et al. (2010) demonstrated that when promotions do not match actual competence, organisational efficiency drops significantly. Shull and Mosely (1974) further argue that it is not just poor promotion practices, but outdated leadership styles and rigid hierarchies that reduce institutional effectiveness.

This mismatch affects language teacher identity. Teachers under unclear or unsupportive leadership often feel demotivated, unseen, or even guilty, especially when their values clash with the top-down goals of the school (Loh & Liew, 2016). Research shows that emotional wellbeing and identity development are tightly connected (De Costa & Norton, 2017; Loh & Liew, 2016). When leadership does not nurture collaboration or recognise teacher agency, emotional labour increases, leading to frustration, burnout, and in some cases, a retreat from one's ideal teaching identity (Beijaard et al., 2004). Shanmugam and Hidayat (2022) found that engagement and accomplishment depend heavily on leadership that empowers and affirms teachers.

This study adopts the Peter Principle not as a deterministic theory, but as a critical lens to examine how structural misalignments in leadership appointments influence ESL teachers' identity construction. Preliminary findings from an earlier phase of this research revealed widespread dissatisfaction among participants regarding their middle leaders' capacity to provide instructional guidance. This prompted deeper inquiry into whether such discontent stemmed from systemic leadership structures that prioritise tenure over capability. By linking leadership ambiguity to disruptions in LTI, the study underscores how ineffective middle leadership contributes to emotional strain, loss of professional confidence, and a weakened sense of pedagogical purpose among Malaysian ESL teachers.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative design to explore how loosely structured leadership practices affect the identity construction of English language teachers in Malaysian ESL programs. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was adopted to make sense of teachers' perspectives, particularly their experiences of institutional support, emotional labour, and perceived leadership gaps. RTA was chosen because it allows for an interpretive, flexible approach that values researcher subjectivity as a tool rather than a bias (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This was particularly appropriate given the study's interest in identity, which is socially mediated and contextually shaped.

Sample

The sample consisted of eight English language educators: five secondary school teachers and three college-level lecturers. All participants were non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) based in Malaysia and had a minimum of five years of teaching experience. Participants were selected via purposive sampling to ensure they had relevant experience working under middle leadership structures. The inclusion of both school teachers and lecturers allowed for comparative insights across institutional levels, particularly in how leadership expectations and identity formation manifest differently across contexts. All participants had direct experience navigating unclear or unsupported leadership dynamics. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the eight participants, detailing their gender and years of teaching experience.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Research Participants

Participant	Gender	Teaching Experience
P1	Male	9 years
P2	Male	8 years
P3	Female	8 years
P4	Male	12 years
P5	Female	13 years
P6	Female	10 years
P7	Female	10 years
P8	Male	9 years

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered through a semi-structured interview protocol designed to explore how leadership practices influence English teachers' professional identity, motivation, and emotional well-being. The questions are validated by an education lecturer, and they cover leadership support, feedback, institutional expectations, emotional responses, and personal teaching beliefs. Eight ESL teachers participated in one-on-one interviews (30–45 minutes), conducted in person or via Google Meet. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and stored securely.

Interview data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). incorporating both deductive codes (from literature and research aims) and inductive insights (from participant narratives). Initial themes, such as leadership ambiguity, emotional strain, and instructional inconsistency, were refined iteratively. A notable finding was the persistent concern over leadership appointments based on seniority rather than instructional competence. This pattern led to the inclusion of the Peter Principle (Peter & Hull, 1969) as a post hoc analytical lens to better interpret the structural and emotional impacts of leadership misalignment.

Data Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility, member checking was employed by sharing transcripts with participants for verification. Peer debriefing between both researchers helped refine themes and minimise interpretive bias. A transparent audit trail, including coding logs, memos, and decision records, was maintained throughout. As both researchers have backgrounds in ESL education, insider insight was balanced with critical reflexivity to interpret data meaningfully within the Malaysian context.

Findings

Understanding the Practices of Middle Leadership

In response to the first research question, teachers in this study interpreted middle leadership (ML) practices primarily through day-to-day actions rather than through formal structures or clearly defined responsibilities. Drawing on De Nobile's (2024) framework, three core dimensions, Staff Development, Managing Curriculum, and Leading Learning and Change, emerged from the interview data. In many cases, the participants' perceptions of ML were closely tied to visible behaviours and interpersonal interactions, rather than strategic leadership or vision-setting. These interpretations reflect a grounded understanding of

leadership as it is enacted, aligning with Spillane (2005) distributed leadership perspective, where leadership is distributed across roles and shaped by context and interaction.

Table 2

Themes and Sub-Themes of ESL Teachers' Interpretations of Middle Leadership Practices

Theme	Sub-theme	Teacher Interpretation	Illustrative Quotes
Staff Development	Mentoring & Professional Support	Leadership is credible when leaders mentor, model practices, and provide CPD guidance.	*P6: "My HOD supports CPD initiatives and regularly arranges teacher training…"*
	Lack of Engagement	Absence of mentoring or visible involvement led to teacher disengagement.	*P3: "My leader, she does… nothing of significant importance… I try not to communicate with her."*
Managing Curriculum	Micromanagement	Teachers felt autonomy was restricted by excessive control.	*P5: "She wants our input (as to how to best help the students) ... but still controls the details."*
Leading Learning & Change	Support for CPD	Some middle leaders facilitated workshops and encouraged learning (literature, AI tools, Cambridge certification).	*P6: "My HOD supports CPD initiatives and regularly arranges teacher training..."*
	Resistance to Innovation	Leaders often enforced outdated practices, creating frustration and stagnation.	*P1: "She insists on us marking essays… I feel it's not effective anymore."*

Table 2 summarises the key themes, sub-themes, teacher interpretations, and illustrative quotes that emerged from the qualitative analysis. For Staff Development, participants described middle leaders as either mentors or passive managers. Positive experiences were tied to leaders who provided hands-on support, modelled best practices, and encouraged professional growth. In contrast, many described leaders as disengaged or invisible, raising concerns about unclear roles and limited leadership presence. Given the top-down nature of CPD in Malaysia (Bush et al., 2019; Thien & Adams, 2021), teachers valued middle leaders who facilitated meaningful learning opportunities or encouraged pedagogical experimentation. Where such support was absent, teachers tended to view leadership as irrelevant to their professional development, highlighting the need for more relational and integrated staff development practices.

For Managing Curriculum, most participants perceived curriculum leadership as procedural, focused on documentation, exam preparation, and lesson plan compliance. This reflects the bureaucratic norms in hierarchical systems. This mirrors findings (Bush et al., 2018; Hallinger & Lee, 2014), where middle leaders serve more as gatekeepers than instructional guides. While these administrative tasks were accepted, tensions emerged around micromanagement and constrained autonomy. Teachers felt they were held responsible for delivery but denied meaningful input, creating a disconnect between leadership oversight and instructional ownership. This top-down approach risks eroding teacher agency and detaching curriculum work from identity-forming or pedagogically rich goals.

For leading learning and change, although some leaders supported innovation by introducing AI tools, Cambridge training, or literature workshops, all these cases were rare. More often, participants described conservative leadership cultures that resisted change, reinforced outdated norms, or lacked instructional vision. Structural limitations and unclear expectations often prevented middle leaders from fulfilling their role as agents of pedagogical improvement (Harris et al., 2019). Teachers reported a sense of professional stagnation: aware of better methods but restricted by rigid leadership or institutional inertia. From an identity perspective, this mismatch diminished motivation, voice, and emotional investment (De Costa & Norton, 2017).

While isolated examples of positive leadership emerged, the dominant tone was one of quiet dissatisfaction. Teachers complied with directives but often questioned their value, expressing frustration with vague communication and limited pedagogical guidance. This gap between role expectations and leadership enactment suggests the need for clearer leadership structures, enhanced autonomy, and more robust preparation for middle leaders.

Influence of Middle Leadership on Language Teacher Identity

The second research question examined how middle leadership shapes Malaysian ESL teachers' identity development. Drawing on Mahmoodarabi et al.'s (2021) interpretive model, four key dimensions were used to analyse teachers' narratives: Institutional and Collective Practice, Appraising One's Teacher Self, Language Awareness, and Sociocultural and Critical Practice. Findings indicate that teacher identity evolves in response to institutional norms, leadership behaviours, policy pressures, and the school's emotional climate. Through their daily interactions and expectations, middle leaders significantly influence whether teachers' identities are affirmed or constrained.

Table 3

Themes and Sub-Themes of Influence of Middle Leadership on Language Teacher Identity

Theme	Sub-theme	Teacher Interpretation	Illustrative Quotes
Institutional and Collective Practice	Policy Ambiguity	Institutional shifts and unclear goals left teachers disoriented; middle leaders appeared uncertain of boundaries.	*P1: "I'm not sure we know what the school wants... I don't think the school has a clear direction..."*
	Selective Compliance	Teachers selectively followed policies, prioritising student needs over rigid enforcement.	*P6: "I try my best to obey but in the end, I selectively followed what worked for my students."*
Appraising One's Teacher Self	Confidence through Trust	Being entrusted with tasks enhanced teachers' sense of worth.	*P4: "Whenever I feel like I do not want to do… I remember her advice and it motivates me..."*
Language Awareness	Symbolic Role of English	Use of Malay/Mandarin in official settings marginalised English and weakened teacher motivation.	*P4: "I wanted higher-level assignments… she thought it would stress students."*
	Pedagogical Tensions	Leaders enforced practices that conflicted with teachers' beliefs (e.g., rewriting essays vs. using model texts).	*P2: "I believe that if they are not writing it well, then the correction that they make is also a terrible piece of work."*
Sociocultural and Critical Practice	Compliance & Power Dynamics	Innovative practices often rejected in favour of rigid documentation and uniform assessments.	*P8: "Ideas were shut down due to strict documentation requirements."*
	Loss of Professional Voice	Teachers complied with mandates for survival, not agreement, leading to frustration and stagnation.	*P2: "They want us to standardise everything... I don't think it is appropriate to just use one test ... (some will find it easy, some will not...)"*

Table 3 above outlines the additional themes, sub-themes, teacher interpretations, and representative quotes that further illustrate the leadership and instructional tensions experienced by participants. For institutional and collective practice, teachers' identities are deeply shaped by their institutional contexts. Participants described how shifting school policies and structural reforms, especially around CEFR, SBA, and digital integration, altered their autonomy and classroom expectations. Unclear institutional goals and overlapping mandates often left them feeling disconnected from a coherent school vision. Such ambiguity, also observed in prior studies (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2019), was compounded by middle

leaders who themselves appeared uncertain of their roles, further limiting instructional responsiveness and collective alignment.

For appraising one's teacher self, his/her self-assessment and sense of professional growth were closely tied to the presence—or absence—of leadership support. Positive identity development was fostered through trust, recognition, and role modelling, even in small gestures such as verbal encouragement. However, such affirmations were inconsistently offered and often relied on the individual leader's style rather than structured mentoring. In a system lacking formalised identity-centred support (Nor & Razak, 2021), these interpersonal cues became critical to sustaining teacher confidence and motivation (Grootenboer, 2018; Shanmugam & Hidayat, 2022).

For language awareness, institutional language ideologies significantly influenced how teachers perceived their subject and professional role. Participants noted that the marginalisation of English, evident in leaders' preference for Malay or Mandarin in formal settings, signalled its secondary status. This undermined teacher motivation and reinforced a view of English as merely examinable, not a living language of thought or interaction. Without visible leadership advocacy for English use, teachers struggled to promote meaningful language engagement, limiting the enactment of holistic language pedagogies (Mahmoodarabi et al., 2021).

For sociocultural and critical practice, power hierarchies, rigid documentation, and performative compliance constrained teacher agency. Teachers recounted having their innovations dismissed, adhering to top-down assessment schemes, and conforming to norms they found misaligned with their pedagogical beliefs. Such experiences bred frustration and professional fatigue. In settings where middle leadership lacks autonomy and development (Nobile et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2023), compliance often reflects survival rather than commitment. Over time, these dynamics risk silencing critical reflection and narrowing professional identity.

Discussion

Middle leadership clearly shapes language teacher identity across institutional, relational, and pedagogical dimensions, but its influence is neither uniform nor consistently positive. This study identified three key constraints that hinder the developmental potential of middle leadership in Malaysian ESL contexts: lack of decision-making autonomy, absence of strategic vision, and interpersonal tensions within teaching teams. These limitations are closely tied to structural ambiguity, seniority-based appointments, and underdeveloped leadership preparation. The Peter Principle (Peter & Hull, 1969) offers a critical lens to interpret

these dynamics, where leaders promoted based on tenure rather than competence often find themselves in roles they are ill-equipped to perform effectively.

First, lack of decision-making autonomy frequently emerged as a key theme, as teachers described their middle leaders as disempowered within top-down school cultures. Even basic instructional or operational decisions required approval from senior leadership, leaving middle leaders unable to act as instructional advocates. This reduced their roles to administrative gatekeepers rather than developmental guides. Such symbolic leadership, shaped by bureaucratic norms, limits their capacity to shape teacher identity meaningfully. These observations align with Nor and Razak's (2021) findings on constrained leadership roles in Malaysia, as well as Pluchino et al.'s (2010) critique of misaligned promotions that result in inefficiency and disengagement.

Second, a lack of strategic vision characterises many middle leaders' practices. Rather than providing pedagogical direction, many middle leaders focused on operational routines, checking lesson plans, managing logistics, and enforcing uniformity. This reactive approach left teachers feeling disconnected from broader educational goals, with few opportunities for innovation or growth. As Bush et al. (2018) argue, when leadership is reduced to compliance, its transformative potential is lost. The Peter Principle offers further insight: without adequate preparation, middle leaders may lack the capacity to inspire change or lead with clarity, especially in environments that prioritise procedure over vision.

Third, tension with colleagues also limited the efficacy of middle leadership. Interpersonal dynamics also limited the efficacy of middle leadership. Several participants reported strained relationships marked by defensiveness, dismissiveness, or rigid control. These tensions often arose when middle leaders lacked emotional intelligence or collaborative leadership skills, reinforcing hierarchies instead of cultivating professional dialogue. This finding echoes researchers (Beijaard et al., 2004; Shanmugam & Hidayat, 2022) who highlight the importance of relational trust and recognition in shaping teacher identity. In the absence of such trust, teachers reported disengagement and a diminished sense of professional worth.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while middle leadership has the potential to mentor, model, and foster teacher identity development, its effectiveness is currently undermined by systemic and relational constraints. Hierarchical structures, unclear role expectations, and seniority-driven promotions often result in symbolic leadership rather than meaningful support. The Peter Principle underscores the risks of such misalignments, where leadership becomes a bottleneck rather than a catalyst. Yet, the study also revealed glimpses of possibility: when middle leaders showed empathy, clarity, and openness, teachers responded with increased confidence, agency, and motivation. Unlocking this potential

requires redefining leadership roles, investing in leadership development, and creating structures that promote distributed, relationally attuned leadership practices (De Nobile, 2018; Tang et al., 2023).

Conclusion and Implications

This study demonstrates that middle leadership (ML) significantly influences the development of language teacher identity (LTI) in Malaysian ESL classrooms, though not always constructively. While some MLs offered instructional support and relational affirmation, most were perceived as constrained by structural limitations, lacking both decision-making autonomy and strategic vision. Instead of functioning as instructional leaders, many acted as compliance officers, with their roles reduced to symbolic or administrative tasks. Viewed through the Peter Principle lens (Peter & Hull, 1969), these challenges stem in part from promotion pathways based on seniority rather than instructional or interpersonal competence. The resulting leadership mismatches contributed to top-down communication, relational tension, and diminished teacher agency.

These findings highlight the need to reconceptualise ML roles, not merely as hierarchical positions, but as developmental, relational, and instructional capacities that shape teacher identity. Strengthening this impact requires targeted leadership development, clearer role definitions, and distributed leadership frameworks that cultivate trust, voice, and professional growth.

However, this study is not without limitations. The small, qualitative sample offers rich insights but limits generalisability across Malaysia's diverse ESL landscape. The exclusive focus on teacher perspectives also excludes institutional and middle leader viewpoints, which could offer a more balanced interpretation.

Future research should adopt a multi-stakeholder approach, incorporating MLs, principals, and policymakers, to triangulate findings and better understand system-level constraints. Longitudinal and mixed-method studies may further trace how structural reforms or leadership training influence LTI over time. Intervention-based research on distributed leadership or coaching programmes could provide actionable models for policy and practice.

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eISSN 3009-0504

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Registration no.: PPM-017-07-04111990