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Relationship Of Technological Use And Learning Preferences With Learning Attitudes In Blended Learning Among Mara Professional College Students

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RELATIONSHIP OF TECHNOLOGICAL USE AND LEARNING PREFERENCES WITH LEARNING ATTITUDES IN BLENDED LEARNING AMONG MARA PROFESSIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning technology combines online and traditional in-person training with digital tools, platforms, and resources. Usually, this strategy entails integrating multiple technology platforms while exploring the differences in students' major learning preferences (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) and attitudes when learning through blended learning. The study aimed to examine the level of learning attitudes when studying in blended learning by investigating the relationship between students' technological use and their learning preferences with learning attitudes in blended learning among diploma students. This quantitative study focuses on 144 students, identifying their characteristics in blended learning. This study uses a correlational design using a quantitative questionnaire based on survey questions from the instrument of Influence of Technological Use and Learning Preferences of Students' Blended Learning Attitudes. The instrument covers four areas: Demographic Information, Learning Preferences, Blended Learning Experiences, Blended Learning Technological Use, and Blended Learning Attitudes. The survey results reveal mixed differences between students' learning preferences and their use of technology in blended learning towards their learning attitudes. A balanced delivery of online and traditional face-to-face learning platforms must be employed to ensure effectiveness in meeting the objectives of any lesson.

Keywords: Educational Technology, Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, Student Engagement

1. Introduction

Education should be accessible to all people even though there are some challenges to overcome. To utilize education to transform the current world we are living in, all barriers to education equity and access shall be removed. One of the many challenges is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education access for many people. Sahu in 2020 revealed that several universities had to shut down due to the impact of the global pandemic COVID-19, which has struck large parts of the world since 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) announced on 11 March 2020 that the disease was a pandemic, meaning specific measures must be taken to combat those problems drastically.

Thankfully, the advancement of technology and widespread access to education will likely ease the issues of delivering instructions during the difficult times of a pandemic like COVID-19. Other than that, in neighbouring countries, such as Indonesia, the quality of education could also be maintained with technology in remote learning, along with increasing teachers' skills in using technology for class instruction (Rayuwati, 2020). The government has eliminated physical classes in China, including banning face-to-face activities and classroom instructions. In addition, an initiative called Disrupted Classes Undisrupted Learning was also launched to provide online learning, which is flexible enough for students to learn remotely (Huang et al., 2020). China, along with the rest of the world, which includes more than 1.5 billion learners worldwide who could not attend schools due to the COVID-19 outbreak (UNESCO, 2020), must come up with solutions to address the difficulty and alternative to instruction physical delivery.

Based on the challenges and issues raised by conducting full online instructions, especially during a pandemic, the need for a mixture of online and physical interactions is crucial to ensure the quality of education. This concept is called hybrid education or Blended Learning (BL). By combining online and offline learning, blended learning provides a more comprehensive educational experience (Amanda et al., 2024). It also helps students overcome obstacles like time and place by allowing them to access resources at any time and learn quickly (Farhat et al., 2024). Through blended learning, students can still take advantage of in-person interactions and practical exercises in a traditional classroom environment while accessing course materials and completing projects at their leisure online. This method supports a range of preferences for learning and styles, allowing teachers to use digital technologies to offer individualized materials and support in addition to providing in-person direction and evaluation.

1.1 Research Questions

1. What are the characteristics of technological use in blended learning among MARA Professional College students?
2. What are the characteristics of learning preferences among MARA Professional College students?
3. What are the features of learning attitudes towards blended learning among MARA Professional College students?
4. What is the relationship between technological use and learning attitudes in blended learning among MARA Professional College students?
5. What is the relationship between students' learning preferences and learning attitudes in blended learning among MARA Professional College students?

2.   Literature Review

2.1 Technology Use in Blended Learning

How students interact with and perceive learning has changed significantly because of the introduction of technology into the classroom (Hock, 2024; Nadzri, 2024). Blended learning is one such strategy that has gained popularity recently. It mixes traditional in-person training with online and digital components (Sarkar, 2023). However, there have been difficulties in implementing technology in the blended learning approach. Blended learning effectiveness depends on several elements, including students' ability and ongoing commitment to technology use (Ghandirian, 2016). Students who have difficulty utilizing the technology components of blended learning may eventually stop participating, which could result in an unsatisfactory implementation. For example, India's educational system is changing as it attempts to use new technologies to meet students' demands and overcome growth issues.

The learning process is enhanced by using virtual simulations and multimedia materials, making it more engaging for students (Halus et al., 2024). Students can participate in realistic events and experiments using virtual simulations, giving them practical experience that helps them better understand difficult ideas. Videos, animations, and interactive graphics are multimedia products that combine visual, aural, and kinaesthetic aspects to accommodate different learning styles and make learning more engaging and memorable.

2.2 Students' Learning Preferences in Blended Learning

Since blended learning offers a variety of teaching strategies and resources, it may accommodate a wide range of learning preferences, including kinaesthetic, visual, and auditory (Legamia & Akiate, 2020). While visual learners can interact with multimedia presentations, movies, and visual aids, auditory learners may benefit from the inclusion of audio recordings, podcasts, and interactive discussions. In contrast, kinaesthetic learners might benefit significantly from blended learning settings, including interactive learning modules, simulations, and hands-on exercises (Smith & Harvey, 2014). By providing a variety of ways for students to interact with the course material, blended learning environments can be created to meet their individual learning preferences. Giving students access to various resources—such as face-to-face encounters, online content, and print-based materials—will let them select the learning methods that work best for them (O'Keefe et al., 2014). Additionally, blended learning can improve student engagement and interaction by offering knowledge in various forms that cater to students' different learning requirements. Research has demonstrated that effectively planned blended learning can take advantage of the positive aspects of both face-to-face and online instruction while catering to each student's particular learning style (Herbert et al., 2017). Based on the earlier studies, three primary learning preferences were identified for this study namely visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.

2.3 Learning Attitudes in Blended Learning

According to Razali et al. (2022), the fact that students' learning styles are changing should be taken very seriously. Additionally, the capability of the learning environment to support adequate accessibility of learning is a key component in guaranteeing that students can access learning without needing to be physically present at their academic institution. Identifying students' learning attitudes towards blended learning lessons and catering to their different needs is also essential. This change calls for incorporating cutting-edge technical tools and resources to produce a more adaptable and inclusive educational environment. To ensure that

every student may reach their maximum potential, educators must also frequently adapt their teaching methods to accommodate these changing preferences for learning.

Several positives and negatives can be identified in students' attitudes toward implementing teaching and learning activities in Blended Learning. According to Tran and Nguyen (2023), many students value BL's flexibility since it helps them better manage their time and improves their educational experience. It highlights how students value blended learning's (BL) flexibility since it helps them better manage their time. This flexibility is beneficial when balancing family, job, and study obligations. Additionally, by accommodating different learning requirements and preferences, the mix of online and in-person instruction improves the overall educational experience.

However, Tran and Nguyen (2023) also noted that many students complain about feeling alone and unable to interact with peers and teachers, making learning more difficult. Furthermore, lacking engagement might hinder students' access to prompt feedback and assistance, worsening their academic performance and general wellbeing. Other than that, a more positive note on the blended learning attitude saw that many students favor blended learning over traditional or fully online formats, highlighting its significance in modern education (Huda et al., 2023). Blended learning integrates the benefits of conventional and virtual education, enhancing adaptability to diverse learning styles. This hybrid model enhances accessibility and flexibility while fostering an engaging and interactive learning environment, essential for student success in the current educational landscape.

2.4 Framework of the Study

Understanding how people learn differs from person to person and is essential for the student's performance. Understanding how learning occurs for various students can be quite helpful for both teachers and students. Teachers may make the most of their efforts and design classroom environments where students can succeed by knowing how learning takes place. One learning framework, transformative learning, focuses mainly on young adult and adult education. Transformative learning, or transformational learning, emphasizes that students can modify their thinking in response to new information. The researcher adopted Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory to describe the process in this study. Mezirow's transformative learning is "an orientation which holds that the way learners interpret and reinterpret their sense experience is central to making meaning and hence learning" (Western Governers University, 2020). There are four types of learning for Mezirow's 2000 Revised Transformative Learning Diagram, which are: (1) Elaborating existing frames of reference, (2) Learning new frames of reference, (3) Transforming habits of mind, and (4) Transforming points of view.
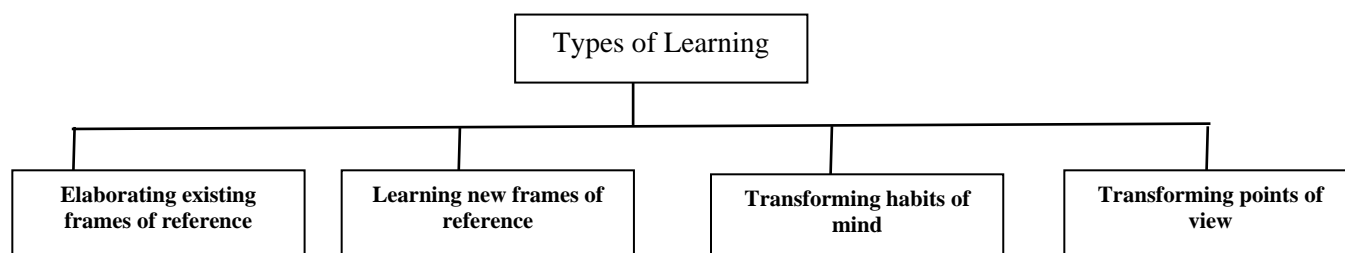

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Mezirow's 2000 Revised Transformative Learning

In this case, the theory most suitable to be adopted is transforming habits of mind through learning attitudes and learning new frames of reference with the influence of technology. The students' usual and comfort territory of learning physically with the active involvement and presence of teachers was replaced by the blended learning environment in which required more independent learning from students and typically unlike any other their usual learning environment. Thus, required them to transform their mind habits in learning. Other than that, the students' relatively new experience with technological use like online learning platforms and tools gave them new perspectives and frames of references in teaching and learning activities.
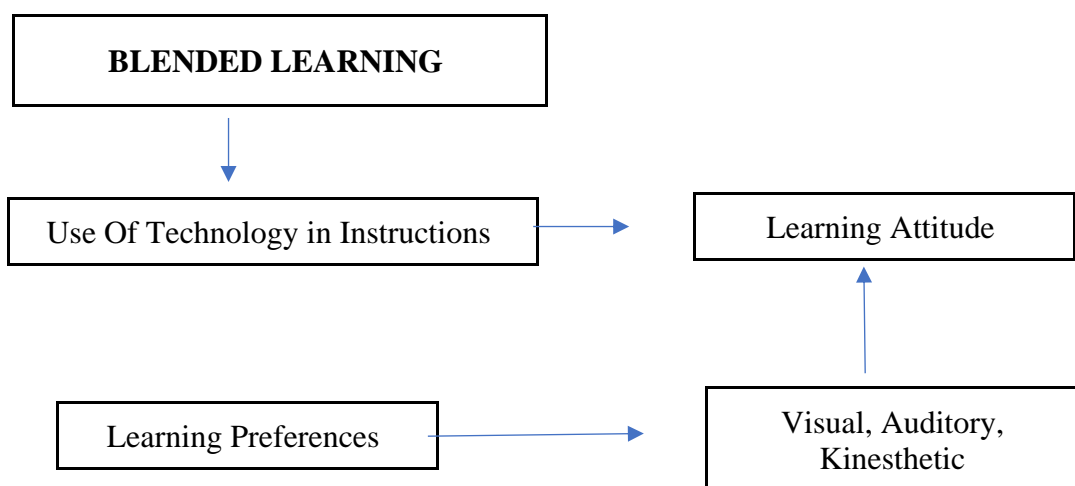

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Study

3. Research Method

The correlation between students' learning preferences and technological use towards learning attitudes in blended learning is investigated by adopting a quantitative technique using a cross-sectional survey research methodology. Correlation analysis was used in the research design to ascertain the correlations between the variables (Mullisi & Razali, 2024).

The survey was not subjected to Cronbach's internal consistency coefficient due to the adaptation of earlier research instruments in carrying out this research. The test was applied to the set of items proposed to measure the variables of this study. The coefficient value "applicable to attitudes, opinions, questionnaires, or scale reliability analysis" is generally distributed between 0 and 1 (Lei & Razali, 2021). It was found that the questionnaire presented in this study has an overall Cronbach's coefficient of 0.877, and its reliability is considered adequate, according to Barrios and Cosculluela, because it ranges between 0.7 and 0.95 (Suárez-López et al., 2023).

3.1 Instrument

The instruments are adapted from Learning Styles: Make the Student Aware by O'Brien (1989), The Effect of Technology Integration on EFL Learners' Motivation and Achievement: A Meta-Analysis. Educational Technology Research and Development by Kim and Kim (2021), and Students' Attitudes Toward Blended Learning in EFL Context by Azamat et al. (2018). The questionnaire contains 60 questions divided into six main sections to identify the relationships of variables. Firstly, the questions are adapted from O'Brien (1989) to collect

information on students' different learning preferences in class. Secondly, through adaptation from Kim and Kim (2021), the information on students' use of technology in classroom learning was able to be collected, and finally, data to collect students' learning attitudes in a blended learning classroom was identified through the adaptation of an instrument from Azamat et al (2018).

3.2 Sampling and Location

The study focuses on a public tertiary educational institution located in Perak. The selection of the location uses a purpose sampling strategy. This purposeful sampling method is often used in qualitative studies. Still, it is similarly effective in this quantitative study where specific criteria of students are identified to fulfill these study objectives. According to Campbell et al. (2020), the sample techniques distinctly place every study concerning data collecting and analysis reliability. Every component of rigor is addressed by the chosen purposive sampling strategy employed in each instance, which aligns with the goals, objectives, and research technique. The sampling strategy was used because of the intention to select certain groups of respondents based on the medium they have been learning through last semester. Students at the MARA Professional College were known to learn thoroughly in physical mode. However, since the college must undergo renovation, certain sections of the institute were closed down, resulting in many students learning through blended learning, 6 weeks physical and another six weeks online. The affected students are from the Diploma in International Business (DIB). They are instructed to learn on different platforms than other students in the same college (Diploma in English Communication, Diploma in Marketing, and Diploma in Business Information Technology) due to these reasons:

1. DIB is a standalone program- not a common program shared with other KPMs.
2. The total population of DIB students (230) matches the number of classes (10) affected by the renovation.

The only MARA Professional College students who underwent blended learning for the past year are the DIB students. Hence, the study using this sample can represent the other total population of KPM students who have never experienced blended learning while studying at KPM. As a result, the number of samples determined for this research is 144, based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970).

Even with the lack of KPM, students are exposed to the blended learning method during their studies there, the generalisability of the sampling is proven when the sample of students was purposely selected based on several criteria, namely an even number of students from different classes, which is 10, and students involved in the Blended Learning Approach. As a result, the samples identified were adequate in driving the research and determining the outcome of the study for the whole population of KPM students.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Since the blended learning platform is not widely practiced in MARA Professional College, the survey could only be conducted on the selected group of students as respondents. Hence, purposive sampling was employed to ensure the data was collected within the accurate sample. The data was collected at the end of their semester after 6 weeks of physical learning activities and another 6 weeks of physical learning activities. The students understood the concept of answering the survey questions using Google Forms, and their responses were not influenced.

As mentioned, the data was collected using Google Forms and entered SPSS for descriptive and correlation analysis purposes.

3.4 Normality Test

The normality of the data was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test since the sample size was more than 100 (N= 144). The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results indicate that Learning Attitude has a *p*-value of more than 0.05, meaning that this variable is normally distributed. At the 5% significance level, the null hypothesis of normality cannot be rejected because both p-values are marginally higher than the common alpha threshold of 0.05.

The result for the variable Learning Attitude (dependent variable) is shown below:

Table 1: Normality of the Data

Test of Normality

	Kolmogorov- Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Learning_Attitude	.074	144	.051	.983	144	.067

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

4. Result

4.1 Descriptive Analysis of Variables

As seen in Table 2, the mean value of technological use based on the 144 respondents is 4.00, indicating that, on average, the Tech_Use score is around 4, while the standard deviation score is 0.623. As the highest possible score a respondent can provide is 5 for each item, most of the scores recorded by respondents are high. These results indicate a high level of technological use in blended learning among MARA Professional College students.

This research tested 144 respondents to discover their learning preferences in teaching and learning activities. Three learning preferences can be identified mainly: visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic (Legamia & Akiate, 2020). Table 2 below shows the descriptive statistical results of visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic learning preferences among MARA Professional College students.

In general, the mean values recorded above-average scores for all three learning preferences. Visual learning preference has the highest mean score (3.57) among all three learning preferences, indicating that the participants believed their visual learning preference was higher. The lowest mean score recorded was auditory learning preference, with 3.30, suggesting the students' auditory learning preference was relatively medium. In terms of standard deviation scores, although the variation is similar among all three, the respondents rated their auditory learning preference with more variability compared to visual and kinaesthetic.

The data points to a marginally higher preference for visual and kinaesthetic learning preferences among the respondents than auditory learning preference. However, all preferences recorded relatively similar mean ratings, indicating the balanced variety of learning preferences among MARA Professional College students.

The mean value of the Blended Learning Attitude assessment is 3.34, and the standard deviation is 0.81. Among the items, respondents recorded a range from 1.00 to 5.00, indicating

various scores within this learning attitude variable. The data on learning attitudes show a wide range of scores, with an average slightly above the midpoint, indicating a generally positive learning attitude among participants. The standard deviation and variance suggest a reasonable amount of variability in the learning attitudes, reflecting diverse responses.

Firstly, the standard deviation for technology use shows relatively consistency variability regarding the number of choices. In contrast, the most variation is shown in the data is variable Learning Attitude with 0.81, which indicates the most variation. This means some participants have highly positive attitudes, but others may have lower motivation and engagement.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Tech_Use	144	4.00	.623
Visual_Learning_Preference	144	3.57	.600
Auditory_Learning_Preference	144	3.30	.690
Kinesthetic_Learning_Preference	144	3.53	.611
Learning_Attitude	144	3.34	.814

4.2 Analysis of Male and Female Students Towards Blended Learning Attitude

Table 4 compares two groups of males and females regarding their learning attitudes in blended learning. The average learning attitude score for males (M = 3.53) is higher than for females (M = 3.24). According to this, men in our group generally display a more positive attitude towards learning than women.

Table 4: Comparison of Scores Between Male and Female

Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learning_Attitude	Male	52	3.53	.864
	Female	92	3.24	.768

An independent sample t-test was conducted to test the difference in learning attitudes scores between male and female students. As depicted in Table 5, there was a significant difference in the mean score of learning attitudes in blended learning between male (M = 3.53, SD = 0.86) and female students (M= 3.24, SD = 0.77, t (10) = 2.112, $p < 0.05$). This shows that male students react more positively towards blended learning than female students. This supports the hypothesis of this study that there is a significant difference in students' blended learning attitudes between males and females of MARA Professional College.

Table 5: Result of Independent Sample t-test

Gender	n	Mean	SD	t	*p*
Male	52	3.53	0.86		
				2.112	.036
Female	92	3.24	0.77		

4.3 Analysis of Technological Use and Learning Attitudes Correlations

The value of Pearson's correlation coefficient ($r = 0.415$) shows a moderate positive correlation between the use of technology and learning attitude in blended learning (Guildford, 1973). It can be concluded that as technology use increases, learning attitude increases and vice versa. The higher use of technology in blended learning can also result in students' positive attitudes toward blended learning. Since the probability value is less than the predetermined alpha value, thus the null hypothesis is rejected ($p < (0.05)$). There is adequate evidence to show a significant relationship between technological use and learning attitudes in blended learning. The results show that there is a significant moderate positive relationship between technological use and learning attitudes in blended learning ($r = 0.415$, n = 144, $p < .05$). The findings also reveal that if students use more technology in blended learning classes, the students will also react better and positively in the class.

Table 6: Correlation Between Technological Use and Learning Attitude Correlations

Technological use		Learning_ Attitude
Pearson Correlation	1	.415**
Sig.(2-tailed)		<.001
N	144	144

4.4 Analysis of Learning Preferences and Learning Attitudes Correlations

Based on the findings below, the three learning preferences demonstrated different correlations against learning attitudes in blended learning. Firstly, the value of Pearson's correlation coefficient ($r = -0.001$) suggests no correlation between visual learning preference and learning attitude in blended learning. The significance value of 0.992 indicates this is also not significant regarding statistics. The lack of correlation suggests that visual learning preference does not significantly impact learning attitude in blended learning.

Secondly, the value of Pearson's correlation coefficient between auditory and learning attitude, $r = 0.277$, shows a relatively weak positive correlation. In contrast, Pearson's correlation coefficient between kinesthetics and learning attitude, r = 0.328, represents a moderate positive correlation. Since the probability value is less than the predetermined alpha value, thus the null hypothesis is rejected ($p < 0.05$). Adequate evidence exists to demonstrate there is a significant relationship between both auditory and kinaesthetic learning preferences and blended learning attitudes. In contrast, the relationship between visual learning preference and learning attitude is insignificant.

The relationships between learning preferences, technological use, and learning attitudes in blended learning were investigated using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions. The findings show significant weak to moderate positive relationships between auditory, kinaesthetic, and blended learning attitudes. Students with auditory or kinaesthetic learning preferences will react positively to blended learning activities. In contrast, students with visual learning preferences do not correlate with how they respond in blended learning classes.

Table 7: Correlation Between Learning Preferences and Learning Attitude

		Visual Learning Preference	Auditory Learning Preference	Kinesthetic Learning Preference	Learning Attitude
Visual Learning Preference	Pearson Correlation	1	.581**	.498**	-.001
	Sig. (2-tailed)		< .001	< .001	.992
	N	144	144	144	144
Auditory_ Learning_ Preference	Pearson Correlation	.581**	1	.616**	.277**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< .001		< .001	< .001
	N	144	144	144	144
Kinesthetic_ Learning_ Preference	Pearson Correlation	.498**	.616**	1	.328**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	< .001	< .001		< .001
	N	144	144	144	144
Learning_ Attitude	Pearson Correlation	-.001	.277**	.328**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.992	< .001	< .001	
	N	144	144	144	144

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

5. Discussion

In this study, we formulated and discussed students' learning attitudes in blended learning according to different learning preferences and the influence of technological use. The study identified authentic feedback and responses from students in the following aspects: learning preferences, blended learning experiences, blended learning technological use, and blended learning attitudes. These findings are valuable because they provide evidence of how students react during blended learning and help provide concrete directions for future investigations of students' learning attitudes influenced by different factors, as mentioned by Ince (2023).

As mentioned earlier, several questions were posed to study findings of the connections between technological use and students' learning preferences towards learning attitudes displayed by students in blended learning sessions. According to the analysis of the relationship between students' technological use and learning attitudes in blended learning, the outcome of the study showed a moderate positive correlation between technological use and learning attitudes, indicating that the higher use of technology in blended learning can result in students' positive attitudes in blended learning as well. This corroborates well with previous research by Radovan and Makovec (2024), in which technology-enabled collaborative learning significantly boosted students' satisfaction and participation. They also stated that technology integration in blended learning settings is linked to better learning outcomes and positive student attitudes. The positive findings of this study have significant implications for teaching methods. Academic institutions and teachers must consider integrating adequate technology influence in blended learning to elicit students' positive attitudes during the lessons.

The other issue studied was discovering the relationship between students' learning preferences and their attitudes in blended learning lessons. Three main learning preferences were tested to determine their correlation with students' blended learning attitudes. Among all three learning preferences, kinesthetics offers the most positive correlation with a moderate level of positivity towards learning attitudes compared to auditory (weak positive) and visual (no correlation). It seemed that kinaesthetic students would react positively to blended learning. This almost contrasts with the early transition to e-learning among kinaesthetic

learners, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with various challenges they face (Ameer & Parveen, 2023). This proves the learning environment should be more interactive and engaging to suit the types of learners and positively impact learning.

According to research, personal qualities like academic self-efficacy and self-regulated learning ability are critical in promoting engagement, underscoring the significance of customizing learning experiences to meet the needs of each individual (Wang & Lin, 2024). This highlights the importance of tailoring the learning experience, including both physical and online, based on students' unique learning preferences. They also stated that effective teaching presence increases students' academic self-efficacy, increasing engagement and making the instructor's role crucial. The teachers' role in motivating students can impact students' positive learning attitudes (Ince, 2023).

Nevertheless, there are some limitations when conducting this study. The first limitation is the lack of exposure to blended learning activities among MARA Professional College students. As mentioned previously, MARA, a government education agency, has practiced a policy of 100% physical teaching and learning sessions for some of its educational programs. Due to that constraint, the researcher must identify respondents through a purposive sampling strategy based on certain respondents' criteria for answering the questionnaire. As a result, the sample is limited to only one study program conveniently affected by the college renovation for the research to take place. Another limitation is instructional design. Designing effective blended learning teaching and learning activities may prove to be a significant effort due to the lack of experience among lecturers in conducting a blended learning approach. The researcher briefed lecturers on preparing blended learning activities for students. Other than that, the results of this study provide different ideas for conducting more studies, such as identifying which blended learning activities can increase students' motivation. It is believed that a more structured and interesting method of teaching blended learning can directly impact students' achievement.

Further research can certainly be employed regarding the practical blended learning tools to be identified according to the different learning preferences. Gaps can be filled in to ensure effective and impactful learning experiences occur among students either in the physical environment or online learning platform.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the influence of students' learning preferences and their technological use in blended learning on their attitudes when having a blended learning approach in their learning activities, demonstrating the need to have access to technology to have a practical impact on student's motivation and interest in learning through the combination of physical and online learning. This was proven by the correlation results of technological use and learning attitudes, which showed a significant positive correlation between those two variables. When schools offer better access to technology in the classroom, students will fare better in blended learning lessons. In addition, the influence of learning preferences on students' learning attitudes in blended learning failed to display strong positive correlations. Instead, visuals have little influence on learning attitudes, and the other learning preferences (auditory and kinaesthetic) showed minimal positive relationships and moderate positive correlations, respectively. Again, lecturers' experience in conducting a blended learning approach might play a crucial role in increasing students' positive attitudes in lessons, and future study on that point would play a huge part in identifying the gap.

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FROM FRAMEWORK TO CLASSROOM: HOW MALAYSIAN ESL INSTRUCTORS NAVIGATE SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE THROUGH CEFR

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ABSTRACT

The development of students' sociolinguistic competence has gained greater attention with the introduction of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) into the Malaysian education system, which encourages a shift towards communicative competence. This study explores how pre-degree ESL instructors in Malaysian universities navigate the teaching of sociolinguistic competence in alignment with the CEFR. It focuses on their beliefs about teaching sociolinguistic competence, their acceptance of the CEFR, and how they align their classroom practices with the framework. The findings reveal that instructors generally hold positive views about both sociolinguistic competence and the CEFR, although some concerns remain—particularly regarding the lack of awareness and practical guidance. Instructors reported using meaningful and authentic materials, being mindful of students' backgrounds and needs, and allowing flexibility in classroom interactions. It is hoped that future research will lead to the development of clearer guidelines and training for instructors to support the effective implementation of CEFR-aligned sociolinguistic instruction.

Keywords: communicative competence, ESL learners, higher education

1. Introduction

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was developed as an approach to language instruction that emphasizes interactive teaching methods between teachers and students to cultivate learners who can use the language effectively in communication (Hymes, 1972). Dell Hymes (1972) expanded on Chomsky's (1965) concept of linguistic competence by introducing the notion of communicative competence, which includes the ability to understand and use language appropriately in various social situations. This means that beyond just speaking accurately, a learner should be able to navigate different contexts with suitable language use. Hymes' idea was further elaborated by scholars such as Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), who identified four key dimensions of communicative competence: grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. These dimensions are widely utilized in research on language teaching and learning. Grammatical competence pertains to the accuracy of language use, while sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences focus on adapting language use to different contexts. CLT aims to develop learners who can effectively use language in real-life situations beyond the classroom (Savignon, 2018), which is crucial for second and foreign language learners who may struggle with practical communication.

In recent years, sociolinguistic competence has garnered increased attention in second and foreign language teaching, as educators and researchers recognize the importance of teaching learners how to use language appropriately in various social contexts (Taguchi, 2011; Youn & Kormos, 2022). While foundational work by Halliday (1971) highlighted that sociolinguistic competence involves not only choosing the right words but also understanding their intended meanings, contemporary studies emphasize the growing need to develop learners' ability to interpret and produce contextually appropriate language. Sociolinguistic competence helps learners navigate both the appropriateness of meaning—related to speech acts—and the appropriateness of form, or how language is expressed (Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983). It supports effective communication by prompting learners to consider their interlocutors, the goals of the interaction, and cultural expectations (Taguchi, 2018). However, many second and foreign language learners continue to face challenges with sociolinguistic appropriateness, particularly due to limited access to authentic language use in classroom settings (Liu, 2008; Youn & Kormos, 2022).

The teaching of sociolinguistic competence is vital as even proficiency is not an appropriate benchmark for the language learners' ability to communicate appropriately in different contexts Zarrinabadi, et al., (2021). In the Malaysian landscape, it is hoped that sociolinguistic competence is given emphasis with the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in the teaching and learning of English in the country. However, even the implementation of the framework itself needs to be investigated, as some concerns regarding the alignment to the framework in Malaysia due to the lack of guidance and materials that are localised for Malaysian teachers and students (Foley, 2019; Nur Ashiquin, et. al, 2021). Hence, this study intends to understand how ESL instructors align the teaching of sociolinguistic competence to the CEFR. In order to provide a clear and in-depth exploration of the topic, the instructors' beliefs about the teaching of the competence and their acceptance of the CEFR need to be investigated as they may have an influence on how the instructors choose to align their lessons on sociolinguistic competence to the CEFR.

1.1 Research Questions

1. What are pre-degree ESL instructors' beliefs about the teaching of sociolinguistic competence in the classroom?
2. How is the acceptance of CEFR in Malaysian higher education institutions among pre-degree ESL instructors?
3. How do these pre-degree ESL instructors align lessons on sociolinguistic competence to the CEFR?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Teaching of English in Malaysia: Towards Communicatively Competent Learners

To enhance the communicative competence of young Malaysians, the Ministry of Education has introduced several updates to the English language curriculum. They replaced the Integrated English Language Syllabus for Primary and Secondary Schools (KBSR & KBSM) with the Standard English Language Syllabus for Primary and Secondary Schools (KSSR and KSSM), aiming to implement better Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Liyana, Hamid, & Renshaw, 2019). The previous KBSM syllabus was criticized for emphasizing reading, writing, and grammar at the expense of communicative skills, focusing too much on examination preparation (Fauziah & Fauzee, 2017). Teachers encountered difficulties adapting to learner-centered methods due to large class sizes and challenges in updating their activities to align with the new curriculum (Hardman & Norhaslynda, 2014). Additionally, there were concerns about English threatening the status of Malay and the disparity in English proficiency between urban and rural areas, with some rural Malaysians feeling demotivated as they saw little practical use for English (Zuraidah, 2014).

The Ministry of Education's Roadmap (2015) outlined necessary reforms to address these challenges and further develop communicative competence through English language education. Hazita (2016) suggested that the Roadmap could improve English teaching and address related issues, helping to align Malaysian learners' proficiency with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) adapted from the Council of Europe (2001). The Roadmap encompasses a broad range of educational stages, from preschool to tertiary education and teacher training, focusing on curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment.

In contrast to schools, English language programs in Malaysian tertiary institutions lack standardization and established guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2015). Variations in course outcomes and institutional goals contribute to this lack of uniformity. Although diverse course content and assessments may offer benefits, there are concerns about whether these programs adequately prepare students for real-life communication (Liyana, Hamid, & Renshaw, 2019). This variation is particularly critical for understanding how instructors interpret and implement key language components such as sociolinguistic competence in the absence of centralized guidance. This gap informed the selection of interview-based qualitative inquiry for this study, allowing for exploration into ESL instructors' personal approaches to teaching sociolinguistic competence. Previous research has highlighted several issues with English language teaching prior to CEFR implementation, including insufficient contact hours, non-standardized teacher proficiency levels, student difficulties with learner-centered approaches, and subpar teaching materials (Nurjanah & Siew, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2015). The

introduction of the CEFR in Malaysia aims to elevate educational standards to an international level and provide a benchmark for evaluating graduates' proficiency (Hazita, 2016). Employers face challenges in assessing graduates due to the absence of internationally recognized benchmarks, and the Ministry of Education hopes that CEFR implementation will help address these issues.

2.2. Aligning English Language Instruction at Malaysian Tertiary Institutions with the CEFR for Enhancing Sociolinguistic Competence

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was created to help language learners gauge their proficiency and skills (North, 2007). It offers a clear framework for both teachers and students on how to acquire and assess language abilities through communicative activities (Council of Europe, 2001). The CEFR outlines three main competencies: linguistic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic. Sociolinguistic competence within the CEFR encompasses understanding "linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, register differences, and dialect and accent" (Council of Europe, 2018, p. 137).

Since its early development, there has been debate about how to integrate and assess sociolinguistic competence in the classroom. Issues include its elusive definition within proficiency constructs, imprecise descriptors, and inconsistent teacher responses (North, 2007). To address these issues, the Companion Volume with New Descriptors for the CEFR was introduced (Council of Europe, 2018). Initially, terms like "native speakers" and "nativelike performance" were used, but these were revised to "speakers of the target language" or "proficient speakers" concerning sociolinguistic competence. Savignon (2018) also notes that sociolinguistic competence doesn't require native-like usage but rather the appropriate application of language in various social contexts. The CEFR emphasizes the importance of cultural and societal awareness in language learning, encouraging learners to understand and engage with their interlocutors' intentions and cultural contexts (Council of Europe, 2018). One reason for the CEFR's widespread adoption is its focus on equipping learners to communicate effectively in real-life situations (Foley, 2019). While sociolinguistic competence is crucial, it often takes a backseat to linguistic competence in second and foreign language instruction (Council of Europe, 2001).

In Malaysia, sociolinguistic competence is sometimes overshadowed by linguistic competence in English language classrooms. Normazidah, Koo, and Hazita (2012) have noted that Malaysian classrooms tend to emphasize exam-focused aspects of language rather than those that enhance real-world communication. Given this imbalance, the current study employs semi-structured interviews to explore instructors' perspectives and practices in realigning their teaching approaches with CEFR's sociolinguistic goals. To address this, the Ministry of Education introduced a three-phase plan to align the English curriculum with the CEFR (Ministry of Education, 2015). The first phase focused on teacher training, the second on aligning assessments, syllabi, and curricula to the CEFR, and the third on evaluating and revising these changes. The Ministry aims to stress sociolinguistic aspects to better prepare students for effective communication outside the classroom, in line with CEFR recommendations (Council of Europe, 2001).

However, the CEFR should not be seen as a standalone document; localized guidelines and materials are needed to support its implementation (Moser, 2015). Malaysia lacks a tailored version of the CEFR, unlike countries such as Japan, Thailand, and China (Foley, 2019). The Ministry of Education (2015) intends to evaluate how best to adapt the CEFR for Malaysian

classrooms after initial implementation. This absence of a localized framework could pose challenges for teachers. Moser (2015) reports that some educators struggle with applying the competence-based framework due to a lack of examples or guidance. The use of qualitative interviews in this study thus allows for a contextualized understanding of how Malaysian ESL instructors interpret and adapt CEFR descriptors, especially sociolinguistic ones, within their unique teaching environments. The shift from a knowledge-based curriculum to one focused on competence may lead to confusion and misinterpretation, particularly when the CEFR is not standardized across institutions. This inconsistency raises concerns about how effectively teachers' skills and students' communicative abilities can be assessed across different educational settings.

2.3. Teaching Sociolinguistic Competence in Higher Education Institutions

The mode of instruction and communication in tertiary institutions differs significantly from that in schools, which can be daunting for some students. Adapting to the necessity of using English is another challenge they must face. Sociolinguistic competence in English has become increasingly crucial, especially with the internationalization of higher education. As noted by Altbach (2004), universities worldwide are pursuing internationalization to attract students from various countries. In Malaysia, English is rapidly becoming the primary medium of instruction and communication due to the influx of international students. Both local and foreign students must use English effectively for academic discussions and presentations. However, differences in backgrounds, values, and norms can lead to miscommunications and misunderstandings, affecting how they use and perceive the language (Ng & Nyland, 2017). A lack of sociolinguistic competence can leave students unprepared for interacting in diverse social contexts. A significant issue hindering Malaysian students' development of sociolinguistic competence is its insufficient focus in English classrooms (Foley, 2019). This is partly due to Malaysia's exam-oriented culture; however, assessing sociolinguistic competence through exams does not address the need for practical, real-life application.

To enhance sociolinguistic competence for effective academic and social communication, steps must be taken. The language classroom can serve as a supportive environment for acquiring this competence. Yassin and Norizan (2018) found that Malaysian students from the same class often use similar communication strategies despite their diverse backgrounds, suggesting that classroom language use significantly influences their communicative practices. Furthermore, Norma, Siti Jamilah, and Ahmad Affendi (2016) highlighted how Eastern values impact Malay learners' sociolinguistic choices. Unlike the individualistic nature of native English speakers, Malay learners often prioritize community and group needs, affecting their use of language. Native speakers' sociolinguistic norms may not always align with Malaysian learners' practices (Muthusamy & Farashaiyan, 2017). Therefore, teachers play a crucial role in developing Malaysian learners' sociolinguistic competence. Exposure to native speakers through media might not provide an adequate understanding of sociolinguistic variations, especially within a local context. These pedagogical and cultural insights provided the rationale for selecting semi-structured interviews as the data collection method in this study, allowing ESL instructors to share their beliefs and practices in fostering sociolinguistic competence in diverse classroom contexts. Teachers need to present not only native speakers' sociolinguistic variations but also discuss cultural differences between native speakers and local learners. Researchers have suggested that Malaysian learners' limited exposure to sociolinguistic variations in the classroom contributes to their lack of competence (Farashaiyan & Muthusamy, 2016).

Several studies (Maryam & Wu, 2012; Farashaiyan & Tan, 2012; Norma, Siti Jamilah, & Ahmad Affendi, 2016) have investigated sociolinguistic competence among Malaysian university students. Maryam and Wu (2012) found that both Malaysian and Chinese students tend to form thoughts in their first language before translating them into English, with their responses heavily influenced by their native cultures. Farashaiyan and Tan (2012) revealed that Malaysian and Iranian students both include titles when expressing gratitude, a practice influenced by their native cultures. Malaysian students also used fewer expressions of gratitude compared to their Iranian counterparts, possibly due to limited exposure to language variations. Norma, Siti Jamilah, and Ahmad Affendi (2016) found that Malaysian students use fewer direct refusal strategies, focusing more on preserving feelings, unlike native English speakers who might adopt more direct approaches. This difference may stem from the Eastern cultural emphasis on group harmony compared to the individualistic nature of Western cultures (Asmah, 2002). These findings indicate that learners' sociolinguistic competence is influenced by their cultural backgrounds and norms.

Teachers must guide students in developing sociolinguistic competence, helping them understand and navigate the differences between their own cultural norms and those of English-speaking contexts. Teachers should not only highlight native speakers' sociolinguistic variations but also consider the Malaysian learners' backgrounds (Norma, Siti Jamilah, & Ahmad Affendi, 2016). It's essential to recognize that variations in Malaysian students' language use, while different from native speakers, are not necessarily inappropriate. Sociolinguistic competence involves understanding and using language appropriately in various social contexts, not just mimicking native speakers. Teachers play a vital role in this process by contextualizing language instruction to fit local norms and values. Farashaiyan and Muthusamy (2016) stress the importance of adapting English language instruction to the Malaysian context.

Most local studies on sociolinguistic competence focus on speech acts (Farashaiyan & Tan, 2012; Maryam & Wu, 2012; Marlyna & Salmiza, 2013; Norma, Siti Jamilah, & Ahmad Affendi, 2016; Phanithira & Melor, 2017; Marlyna & Nurul Syafawani, 2018), possibly because they are more observable and measurable than other aspects of sociolinguistic competence. Marlyna and Nurul Syafawani (2018) chose to study speech acts due to their frequent issues among Malaysian students, influenced by cultural factors. Marlyna and Salmiza (2013) noted that speech acts often receive more research attention due to their face-threatening nature, which can be particularly uncomfortable for Asians. To foster communicative competence, teachers need to focus not only on speech acts but also on other aspects of sociolinguistic competence. Awareness of their own language use and its impact on students is crucial. Phanithira and Melor (2017) found that students used more polite language with teachers compared to their peers, while teachers used more direct language. This highlights the need for teachers to be mindful of sociolinguistic variations and their influence on student communication.

The integration of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) into Malaysia's ESL curriculum has prompted a focus on sociolinguistic competence, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. Studies such as Abd Rahman et al. (2022) demonstrate how ESL instructors actively engage students in co-constructing meaning and use explicit teaching methods to foster sociolinguistic competence. However, Nii and Yunus (2022) note that while teachers generally view CEFR positively, they express concerns about the availability of resources and adequate training to effectively implement the framework.

Additionally, Majid and Matore (2024) emphasize the role of language assessment literacy (LAL) in supporting CEFR's integration, pointing to gaps among ESL teachers that may hinder the accurate assessment of sociolinguistic competence. Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of sociolinguistic competence within the CEFR framework, stressing the need for professional development, resource adaptation, and innovative teaching approaches to effectively integrate sociolinguistics into ESL education in Malaysia.

To conclude, the Malaysian education system has been reforming English language instruction to enhance communicative competence, with a focus on real-life communication rather than just exam preparation. The Ministry of Education introduced a new curriculum and the CEFR to improve English proficiency. However, challenges remain in adapting to learner-centered methods, addressing rural-urban disparities, and incorporating sociolinguistic competence, which is often overshadowed by linguistic focus. Sociolinguistic competence, emphasizing appropriate language use in social contexts, is crucial for effective communication, especially in higher education, where internationalization increases the need for cross-cultural understanding. In Malaysian tertiary institutions, English language programs lack standardization, and students' cultural backgrounds influence their sociolinguistic practices. Teachers play a pivotal role in helping students navigate these differences and develop sociolinguistic skills, ensuring that language use aligns with both local and global norms. The shift towards competence-based teaching, however, requires contextual adaptation to the Malaysian environment.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative study has been conducted with pre-degree university instructors teaching English language proficiency courses in understanding their beliefs about the teaching of sociolinguistic competence, the acceptance of CEFR in Malaysian higher education institutions among pre-degree ESL instructors, and how these pre-degree ESL instructors align their lessons on sociolinguistic competence to the CEFR.

A case study approach was chosen, as an in-depth understanding of the issue in the existing context is imperative Creswell and Poth (2018), seeing as CEFR has quite recently been integrated into the teaching of English in education institutions in Malaysia. Moreover, as literature has shown, sociolinguistic competence is vital to be developed among Malaysian students and more studies need to be conducted in this area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the method for data collection, providing the opportunity for in-depth and rigorous exploration of the study, while maintaining consistency across core themes relevant to the research questions. The instructors were interviewed until a point of saturation, and data was sufficient.

3.2. Research Participants

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who could provide relevant and rich information about the phenomenon under investigation. Among the selection criteria are (1) Malaysian, (2) pre-degree English language instructors, (3) teaching in university, and (4) teaching English language proficiency course. The choice of instructors teaching pre-degree students was because they are at the early stages of their university experience. Students making the transition to university often encounter difficulties

adjusting to both the physical and social aspects of university life, particularly in relation to teaching and learning (Sheard et al., 2003). Hence, students in this level of study would be most appropriate for the introduction and teaching of sociolinguistic competence, which would allow them to communicate with others in a variety of contexts.

Malaysian ESL instructors from local public universities that align the curriculum of their English language proficiency courses to the CEFR were identified, and were contacted via email. A total of 10 ESL instructors were initially invited to participate in the study; however, only three instructors were available and agreed to be interviewed. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached after the third interview, at which point no additional participants were recruited.

The small sample size of three instructors is a recognised limitation of this study and may restrict the generalisability of the findings to a broader population of ESL instructors. As a qualitative case study, the aim was not to produce generalisable results but to offer in-depth insights into individual instructors' perspectives and practices regarding CEFR alignment and the teaching of sociolinguistic competence. The title and scope of the article have been carefully considered to reflect this exploratory and context-specific focus.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

This study mainly investigates how ESL instructors align their lessons on sociolinguistic competence to the CEFR. In addressing the first research question, the ESL instructors were asked questions regarding their beliefs about the teaching of sociolinguistic competence, which is vital in understanding their choices in how they teach sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom. As for the second research question regarding the acceptance of CEFR, the ESL instructors were asked about their exposure to the CEFR and how they received this new framework. The instructors' acceptance of CEFR can have a significant influence on how they align with the framework when delivering lessons on sociolinguistic competence. Finally, the third research question is addressed as the ESL instructors answer questions on their practices in teaching sociolinguistics competence whilst aligning to the CEFR.

The data collected through semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The analysis followed a six-phase process: familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into NVivo 12 software to assist in organising, coding, and managing the data systematically.

Initial codes were developed inductively from the data, while also being informed by relevant literature on sociolinguistic competence and CEFR alignment. These codes were then grouped into broader categories, from which subthemes and overarching themes were refined through iterative review and peer debriefing. To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed: credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to verify their interview transcripts and interpretations; transferability was supported by providing rich, thick descriptions of the context and participants; dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail of all analytical decisions and procedures; and confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling to minimise researcher bias and maintain transparency throughout the analysis.

The themes were compared and reviewed to ensure that they were truly reflective of the ESL instructors' responses and addressed the research questions in providing an in-depth understanding of the current landscape in terms of aligning to the CEFR in developing students' sociolinguistic competence.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the JKEUPM at the researcher's institution, ensuring that all research procedures complied with institutional and national ethical standards for research involving human participants.

All participants were provided with an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, the voluntary nature of participation, and measures taken to ensure confidentiality and data protection. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their identities, and any potentially identifying information was removed from transcripts and publications. Participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for academic purposes and that no personal or professional repercussions would arise from their participation.

4. Findings and Discussion

The three ESL instructors chosen for this study have taught for less than 5 years at their respective institutions. Instructor A teaches diploma-level students, whereas Instructor B and C teach foundation-level students. In terms of their students' field of study, Instructor A and C teach students from a variety of study programmes, while Instructor B teaches students from only one study programme. They are all teaching English language proficiency courses under the same higher education institution, but at different locations.

The sections below are organised according to the research questions.

4.1. RQ1: Beliefs about the Teaching of Sociolinguistic Competence in the Classroom

Based on the literature discussed in the previous sections, it can be deduced that the teaching of sociolinguistic competence in Malaysian classrooms needs to be studied further. Moreover, instructors' beliefs specifically need to be studied as it is not the common dimension of communicative competence which is emphasized in Malaysian English language classrooms. This is echoed by Instructor B, who feels that the teaching of language is about fluency, and that students will not see the significance of developing their sociolinguistic competence because it is not graded.

"Especially because we evaluate students based on that. Remember that we give them their marks based on their fluency and their language skill, rather than their ability to use language in appropriate context. It's important, but we don't grade them based on that." (Instructor B)

Savignon (2018) has also discussed the lack of emphasis on appropriacy and communicative skills compared to fluency and accuracy in studies related to the teaching and learning of English. With regards to this, instructors such as Instructor A and C feel that the development of students' sociolinguistic competence is vital, as it allows students to explore politeness, different contexts and audiences, as well as sensitivity when communicating with others.

"... according to the cultural need, according to the purpose, at the moment when they are communicating, so I think it is good to teach the students about what are the polite ways to talk, I mean in approaching different audience" (Instructor A)

Similarly, a study by Al-Sallal and Ahmed (2022) had discussed the importance of understanding culture and background among learners of English as a second and foreign language especially to avoid misunderstandings and miscommunications. In fact, Instructor C goes on to add that having sociolinguistic competence allows language learners to be more sensitive of current issues occurring in the society to avoid from offending others due to ignorance and appropriateness in communicating with others.

With regards to their concerns on teaching the competence, Instructor B and C highlight that sociolinguistic competence is a complex concept for them to teach to their ESL learners. Inatructor C explains that he would introduce sociolinguistic competence differently to students with varying proficiency levels.

"...depends on my audience. Like, for example, if I'm teaching, (students with higher proficiency), I can go all out. But, like, when I'm teaching, (less proficient students), for example. I can't go into it that way. They won't even understand. So I maybe embed it within my courses" (Instructor C)

Zarrinabadi, et al., (2021) discussed the different studies that investigated the relationship between proficiency level and sociolinguistic competence. It was revealed that at times the students' level of proficiency may have an impact on the development of their sociolinguistic competence perhaps due to their lack of linguistic ability to express appropriate language use.

It can be clearly seen that ESL instructors in higher education institutions have differing views of the teaching of sociolinguistic competence. Hence, this needs to be taken into consideration before even delving into the idea of aligning to the CEFR for the development of sociolinguistic competence in the ESL classroom. How teachers view sociolinguistic competence itself, and how students perceive this dimension of communicative competence can have a vital role in whether or not it is given emphasis in the classroom.

4.2. RQ2: The Acceptance of CEFR among Pre-Degree ESL Instructors

4.2.1 Exposure to the framework
The second research question was raised due to the fact that the CEFR has been introduced to the Malaysian education system, but there has yet to be a thorough discussion of the acceptance of ESL instructors with regards to aligning the current syllabus to the CEFR. Though The Roadmap includes the higher education institutions in its plan, it could be said that aligning to the CEFR is not an easy feat as there is no standardisation among higher education institutions in the country unlike secondary and primary public schools (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Instructor B has never been exposed to CEFR by his institution, while Instructor A said that no specific briefing or workshop was given in terms of aligning to CEFR, but she did attend a workshop for new courses that did mention aligning to the CEFR levels. As for Instructor C, his institution would often conduct workshops in aligning their courses and programme to the CEFR.

"They would do a special it's like it's a 2-day workshop. The first day is on CEFR only. And

we have some of our lectures like Dr. YYY, for example, which is a pro. So these lecturers will just come in and talk about it. And I remember, because (our department), they do have a comprehensive seminar on it." (Instructor C)

The jarring difference in the exposure that is given to the instructors on CEFR by their institution can definitely have an impact on their acceptance of the framework. As Instructor B mentioned, aligning to the CEFR requires for the institution administrators to play a vital role in giving exposure.

"I think it is possible for us to adapt CEFR in our Malaysian higher education curriculum. It's just the educators, the lecturers need to be more exposed. Because if we don't know about CEFR, there's no way we are going to implement it." (Instructor B)

English language teachers in Malaysian schools are ready to accept the implementation of the CEFR in Malaysian schools, however there are concerns regarding having sufficient materials (Nur Ashiquin, et al., 2021). This could be because of the lack of standardization for higher education curriculum compared to secondary school curriculum, where alignment is standardized and clear.

It could be said that the acceptance of the framework among ESL instructors in Malaysian higher education institutions is very much influenced by the lack of exposure to it. Hence, more exposure needs to be given by the ministry and the university administrators to English language instructors so that appropriate alignment and integration of the CEFR can be done.

4.2.2 Self-learning of the framework

Due to their exposure or lack of exposure, all three instructors have all embarked on their own self-learning journeys in terms of getting more information on the framework and how to align it to the current curriculum. Instructor A decided to search for information on the CEFR because she became interested in it when it was first introduced in the country.

"I have read about CEFR before when it first, it was first implemented in Malaysia, when there are so many people talking about CEFR. I become interested, and I tried to search for it." (Instructor A)

The internet becomes the main source of information for these instructors, including Instructor B who has expressed this, mentioning "That is the only, my only source of info on CEFR, from my own research on the internet." This is a matter of concern because it would seem as though these instructors do not have a proper guideline that they can refer to for the implementation of the CEFR in teaching of English in higher education institutions (Foley, 2019).

Instructor C, despite having been introduced to the CEFR through workshops, also had to go through his own self-learning process when he had to assess the students' English exit tests that are aligned to the CEFR.

"Especially when, I had to do that because when we first had to assess the English exit test, that was when I was introduced to CEFR. It was the first time." (Instructor C)

Even though workshops are conducted, it is still vital to recognise that the alignment to the CEFR in terms of English language assessment requires a deeper understanding of the

framework. In fact, the Council of Europe had introduced the Companion Volume to providing clearer descriptors so that appropriate assessments can be planned for the curriculum development.

The fact that ESL instructors are learning about the CEFR on their own is good, but it is important that administrators provide the proper training on the CEFR so that the instructors are more inclined to accept the framework and align to it.

4.2.3   The reality of CEFR-alignment in Malaysia

Ideally, we would expect that the alignment of the CEFR to the teaching and learning of English in higher education institutions in Malaysia would go smoothly as planned. Unfortunately, this is not the experience of these three ESL instructors. Instructor A pointed out that the ministry has aligned to the CEFR, identifying B1 as the level that Form 5 students should be when they leave school.

"...B1 by the end of Form 5. But unfortunately, when the students come to (this institution) – I can only speak based on my experience teaching diploma students, I can see that they don't really reach B1 level" (Instructor A)

For diploma students, it can be seen that they are not B1 level as planned by the ministry. This could be due to a number of factors, but how ESL instructors manage this is what Instructor A sees as most important. This coincides with a study conducted on the curriculum for the teaching of English in a higher education institution in Malaysia that has been aligned to the CEFR. It was found that the students' current level of proficiency did not match the CEFR level they were expected to be in, and this was echoed by employers who expected the graduates to achieve a certain level pf proficiency (Che Musa, et al., 2021). Similarly, in this study, Instructor A faced the need to refer to the CEFR level which is below the level that is expected of the students. Hence, materials and tasks needed to be modified accordingly.

Having a different perspective, Instructor B states that for him, lessons are not focused on CEFR as a framework, but on students' needs. He feels that having knowledge on CEFR has not affected the way he teaches, rather he prefers to align the lesson to students' needs.

"I simply teach based on the students' needs. You know, because it depends on their needs ... Personally for me, the knowledge about different levels of CEFR, umm did not change my teaching style" (Instructor B)

This perspective is also important to discuss, seeing as ESL instructors who feel this way might not be inclined to learn more about CEFR as they do not see the importance of aligning to it. This is the reality from not only the eyes of Instructor B, but possibly many other ESL instructors. Though the CEFR has been introduced in Malaysia and most institutions are aligning their curriculum towards it, perhaps some apprehension stems from the lack of exposure to the framework. This goes back to the first theme that was found on the lack of exposure of ESL instructors to the CEFR.

Though CEFR alignment may be seen in a positive light, it is vital to also note that the descriptors might not be realistically assigned to the students based on their education level. Besides that, some ESL instructors may feel that aligning to the CEFR is not necessary as they can proceed with the current way they are evaluating and teaching students.

4.2.4   CEFR as a measure for assessment

The CEFR is also used for planning and designing assessments in English language classrooms. Instructor C feels that the CEFR provides a good measure for assessment as it illustrates clear descriptors of each level, and it focuses more on the ability to communicate rather than mainly on accuracy.

"What does a band 6 mean? What does a band 4 mean? ... MUET is more academic in a way. It's more on accuracy" (Instructor C)

When assessing students' skills in communicating in English, Instructor C feels that more emphasis should be given to the students' ability to convey meaning and interact effectively, rather than accuracy. Moreover, comparing CEFR for assessment to the Malaysian University English Test, Instructor C finds that the CEFR provides clearer descriptors for each level which assists in not only assessing the students, but also for designing lessons, choosing materials and providing students with a clear understanding of how they can improve.

Similarly, Instructor A also finds that planning assessments has been made easier with the CEFR, as she would identify materials that match the students' level according to the CEFR based on the clear descriptors that are provided.

"When we set for the examination, we try to search for the text or the material that matches to the students' level ... So all our materials are set using B1 because we want to try to cover the level that they are unable to reach before" (Instructor A)

For example, when they are teaching students to be in B1 level, they assess the students with materials that are suitable for B1 level. The Council of Europe (2018) had in fact prepared the companion document which provides clearer descriptors and elaborations for specific tasks. A Malaysian study examined whether existing writing and reading assessment items were in line with the CEFR (Mohamad Uri & Abd Aziz, 2020). Based on the study, it could be seen that the CEFR provides a clear and comprehensible framework for teachers to refer to in terms of designing assessments for their students.

It can be said that the ESL instructors in this study are able to accept the alignment of the curriculum to the CEFR as the planning of assessments is made easier.

4.3. RQ3: Aligning Lessons on Sociolinguistic Competence to the CEFR

4.3.1   Choosing authentic and meaningful materials

The most prevalent theme in addressing this research question is the ESL instructors' commitment and effort in choosing authentic and meaningful materials. The CEFR also highlights the importance of exposing learners to authentic and meaningful tasks and materials, especially as second or foreign language learners (Council of Europe, 2001). They might not be able to culturally relate to materials which can impact their language learning experience. This exposure to authentic and meaningful materials would definitely have an impact on the development of their sociolinguistic competence, which relies heavily on real-life context (Foley, 2019).

Instructor A introduced her students to listening materials that she felt sounded more authentic, and the topics discussed were familiar to students. It improved students' motivation

to learn compared to listening texts that were inauthentic. Previously, they had used texts that were prerecorded specifically for the lesson and those sounded stilted, not like what the learners would experience in real life. Instructor A said, "…we adopt it from a factual text … somehow it might sound formal. Might not be the real situation."

As for Instructor B, he decided to use materials that might be meaningful to learners because of their backgrounds and interests. He said, "When my students mention new songs, or new kpop band, I will google it and think of how to relate it to the next lesson." He found that using materials that the students felt to be meaningful to them would improve engagement and motivation to learn in his English language classrooms. Moreover, exposing the learners to authentic and meaningful materials would have a positive impact on the development of their sociolinguistic competence as they are exposed to language that is appropriate in various contexts. The CEFR also emphasises on the need for authenticity and meaningfulness when planning class tasks and interaction with students in the language classroom (Council of Europe, 2001).

When choosing materials for the English language classroom, Instructor C also pointed out the need for ESL instructors to be aware of students' exposure to the language and provide materials accordingly especially in terms of exposing those students to the relevant materials that might assist them in their language learning journey.

"They don't have access to the wide variety of media because it's a luxury. Not all students have that. Not all students have access to Astro. What more Netflix?" (Instructor C)

Due to the students' lack of exposure to the English language, Instructor C feels that it is the responsibility of the ESL instructor to introduce students to these materials so that they may have a good example of language use which is authentic and relatable.

Nur Ashiquin, et al., (2021) also discussed the lack of appropriate materials in ESL classrooms that align to the CEFR. The existing materials are not localised to the Malaysian students' needs and background. This relates to the next theme regarding the need for ESL instructors to be sensitive to students' needs and background.

4.3.2   Sensitivity to students' background

In order for the ESL instructors in this study to choose authentic and meaningful materials and plan their lessons whilst aligning to the CEFR, these instructors must first be sensitive and aware of their students' and background. A study by Marlyna and Syafawani (2018) has also discussed and emphasised the need to gain a better understanding of Malaysian students' background in raising awareness and consideration when communicating. In fact, the Council of Europe (2001) has also stated in the CEFR document how the students' individual variations such as their backgrounds might have an impact on their learning, and hence teachers need to know how to adapt their lessons accordingly.

In relation to his choice of materials to be used in the English language classroom, Instructor C made connections to his students' background, and how it would affect their background knowledge on not only the English language but also certain cultural elements that different texts might have. When faced with this, he would take make the effort to explain the context that the students might not be familiar or exposed to.

"...one challenge would be what I would like to say schema. Sometimes when I talk about,

certain schemata alright, how some people, they don't have that background. So I have to explain the background as well." (Instructor C)

Instructor A also felt that the students' background, or specifically the school they went to, would have an impact on their experiences in learning English because of the culture of the school in relation to the use of English.

"Usually for me, during first class I have asked about their SPM English grade, and what kind of school that they come from. Because to be honest, those who study in Convent school, in the SBP, MRSM, they do have language week, or at least language day in which it is compulsory for them to speak in English. So it is different, and even if they come from daily secondary school, I will ask is it cluster school, SBT, you know because the culture of the school also plays a big role." (Instructor A)

Students who go to schools where English is commonly used would have a better opportunity of being exposed to various forms of the English language, compared to those who did not. Moreover, those with different backgrounds might use different expressions to communicate the same message, which could impact in misunderstandings and miscommunications (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2019). Hence, when teaching students and developing their sociolinguistic competence, ESL instructors would need to be more sensitive of their students' backgrounds in order for them to provide an inclusive and appropriate learning experience for all.

4.3.3   Allowing flexibility in classroom interaction

An important characteristic for an ESL instructor in developing students' sociolinguistic competence and aligning to the CEFR would be flexibility in terms of classroom interaction. Instructor A expresses the need to provide a variety of contexts to learners for them to practice interacting in English, including situations where they talk to different people and about different topics based on what they are lacking in when communicating in English.

Instructor C feels that at times ESL instructors can be too structured, whereas he feels that admitting your mistakes at times can also be a learning opportunity for the students. He mentioned an instance where he admitted to using sociolinguistically inappropriate language. He used this to discuss the language use and teach the students about the appropriate way to convey meaning.

"I myself have had various of instances where, I accidentally was sociolinguistically incompetent. So I like to share stories. The way I talk about it and sort of and I like to give advice to my students as much as possible." (Instructor C)

Some language instructors may be worried to stray from standard language use in the classroom (Phanithira & Melor, 2017). However, instructors need to be more open to the use of language varieties in the classroom in order to develop students' sociolinguistic competence (Mougeon & Rehner, 2019). When ESL instructors are more flexible to sociolinguistic variations in the classroom, they open more opportunities for the development of the competence for students.

Being open to sociolinguistic variations of course does not mean inappropriate use of the language. Instructor B found that the best way to develop students' sociolinguistic competence would be to interact with them using appropriate language for students to model after. He said

sociolinguistic competence is not something that can be easily taught in class at it would require specific contexts for it to be relevant. Hence, he would usually make learning opportunities in the classroom in order for the students to be able to gain the opportunity to develop their sociolinguistic competence through interaction in the classroom. He once faced a student who used inappropriate language in the classroom and he decided to use that moment to teach appropriate language use.

"I simply rephrase his words to him. So I said, "Okay, so you came in late because your internet connection was bad". So like rephrase to give him the implied idea that "This is the language that I should use, instead of the previous". ".(Instructor B)

Through his indirect approach in several incidents, Instructor B feels that students have improved their sociolinguistic competence while communicating in the classroom and via their online interactions. The development of sociolinguistic competence is emphasised in the CEFR as it is one of the important dimensions in achieving communicative competence (Council of Europe, 2001).

4.4. Overall Discussion and Implications

Regarding the beliefs of the pre-degree ESL instructors regarding the teaching of sociolinguistic competence in the language classroom, it was revealed that the competence indeed needs to be taught in ESL classrooms. This is supported by Al-Sallal and Ahmed (2022), who express the need to address the different backgrounds and contexts that might differentiate each communication, and how having sociolinguistic competence might assist learners in navigating these differences. Moreover, merely aiming for proficiency is not sufficient in making language learners communicatively competent, as proficient learners are not necessarily sociolinguistically competent (Zarrinabadi, et al., 2021). Therefore, ESL instructors cannot overlook the teaching of sociolinguistic competence, especially in the Malaysian English language classroom. If Malaysian ESL instructors did not place much emphasis on sociolinguistic competence, they would not be able to align to the framework and develop their students' competence in this area.

As for the second research question on the ESL instructors' acceptance of the framework itself, it was found that they are able to accept the implementation of the CEFR in the Malaysian education system. However, they have raised concerns that need to be addressed in order for an appropriate implementation of the framework. One of the concerns is the lack of exposure to the framework, especially with the lack of existing localised materials (Nur Ashiquin, et al., 2021). The Malaysian ESL instructors in higher education institutions end up having to self-learn regarding the framework due to the absence of a localised guideline of the framework for the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia (Foley, 2019). Moreover, there is another concern regarding a disparity between the expected CEFR level of students as ascribed by the Ministry of Education (2015) as compared to the reality, in which learners are not able to achieve the expected CEFR level (Che Musa, et al., 2021). The ESL instructors feel that the CEFR provides an appropriate measure for students' capabilities in using the language (Mohamad Uri & Abd Aziz, 2020), but perhaps improvements can be made in providing localised and contextualised guidelines and materials. The CEFR is well accepted among Malaysian English language instructors, but they hope for a better planning and execution by the policy makers and administrators. If appropriate exposure and training on CEFR is not given to Malaysian ESL instructors, they would not be able to align to the framework, hence being unable to follow through with The Roadmap by the ministry.

In aligning the teaching of sociolinguistic competence to the CEFR, it goes beyond the chosen method of conveying the lesson or the topics chosen in class. One of the most important choices that these ESL instructors made is the use of authentic and meaningful materials. Sociolinguistic competence can only be achieved if language learners are exposed to a variety of real-life contexts in the classroom (Foley, 2019), and the lack of existing CEFR-aligned materials that provide localised real-life experiences to learners is prevalent. Having an understanding of students' backgrounds and how this might impact the choice of materials, approach and classroom interaction is vital in avoiding misunderstandings and miscommunication (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2019). Furthermore, being flexible in classroom interaction not only means instructors need to be open to how students might communicate differently, but language instructors also need to be open to communicating using sociolinguistic variations themselves (Mougeon & Rehner, 2019). Thus, the teaching of sociolinguistic competence is not a linear path to take for ESL instructors; many allowances need to be made regarding learner individual variations, as well as contextal needs.

Reflecting back on the research questions of this paper, it could be concluded that the current landscape for the teaching and learning of English, especially the development of sociolinguistic competence, seems positive, and that ESL instructors are making efforts towards aligning to the CEFR. It is hoped that policy makers and English language instructors in the country could work towards more localised materials and guidelines for smooth and effective execution of the Malaysian Education Blueprint.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the current landscape in terms of navigating the development of sociolinguistic competence whilst aligning to the CEFR. In order to answer this question, it was important to first understand the beliefs of the teaching of sociolinguistic competence as well as the acceptance of the CEFR among pre-degree English language instructors in Malaysia. To answer both these questions, it could be said that pre-degree ESL instructors have a generally positive perception towards the teaching of sociolinguistic competence and aligning to the CEFR, with a few concerns regarding the feasibility of both, especially with the lack of awareness and exposure to the concept of sociolinguistic competence and to the CEFR.

Having reached an understanding of the beliefs and acceptance of these instructors, only then could the question of aligning lessons to the CEFR for the development of sociolinguistic competence could be answered. In order to align their lessons to the CEFR in developing the students' sociolinguistic competence, the pre-degree instructors chose authentic and meaningful materials, were sensitive to the students' backgrounds and needs, as well as allowed for flexibility in the language classroom. It could be said that the instructors have to approach their classes with an openness to allow sociolinguistic variations to be used so that students can be exposed to them and find opportunities to practice them.

6. Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for English language educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers. First, they highlight the urgent need for targeted professional development and training programmes that equip ESL instructors with the knowledge and tools necessary to effectively teach sociolinguistic competence in line with the CEFR. Second, the study suggests that institutions should invest in creating and disseminating

accessible teaching resources that explicitly address the integration of sociolinguistic elements and CEFR descriptors.

In terms of practical recommendations, it is advised that universities consider incorporating structured workshops or continuous professional learning modules focused on sociolinguistic competence and CEFR alignment. Additionally, collaborative platforms could be established to allow ESL instructors to share best practices, materials, and strategies.

6.1. Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies could be conducted to further provide insight to ESL instructors and policy makers on how further training could be provided to ESL instructors in developing students sociolinguistic competence, especially in aligning to the CEFR. From the interview sessions, it could be concluded that ESL instructors are passionate about developing students' communicative skills, but there are concerns regarding their understanding of the framework and also the availability of resources that may guide them in their teaching and learning process.

Hence, future research could focus on and lead towards the development of a proper guideline for the development of students' sociolinguistic competence, aligning to the CEFR. In providing students with CEFR-aligned opportunities to develop their sociolinguistic competence in the English language classroom, these instructors need to be sensitive to students' backgrounds and needs as well as allow for flexibility when communicating with their learners.

6.2. Concluding Remarks

Ultimately, this study contributes to the ongoing conversation about how Malaysian higher education can better prepare students for real-world communication by reinforcing the role of sociolinguistic competence in language learning. With greater institutional support and clearer pedagogical guidance, ESL instructors can play a pivotal role in ensuring that CEFR implementation goes beyond structural language skills to include the sociocultural nuances of real communication.

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