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## **USAP-USAP: A Sociolinguistic Examination of Discourses on Transnational Identities among Filipino Migrants in Japan**

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### **Abstract**

Migrants transition between ways of life in their home and destination countries, negotiating their identities to meet the demands of everyday life and their new domicile. Identity, although exceptionally abstract, fractured, and dynamic, becomes analyzable through the mundane social activity of discourse. The current study looked at how Filipino migrants from various origins discussed transnational identity via spoken discourse termed as usap-usap. Usap-usap in Tagalog means ‘light conversation’ and served as the data-gathering method in the study. The co-construction of transnational identity via usap-usap involved four informants (a highly skilled professional, an educator, a student, and a family member of a Japanese national) who represent different categories of Filipino migrants in Japan. The usap-usap with and among the migrants showed the emergence of a transnational identity, characterized by biculturalism strategies and multilingualism. Biculturalism was reflected by the Filipino migrants narratives describing how they modified their practices vis-à-vis spirituality and religiosity, punctuality, and linguistic differences between the Philippines and Japan. Linguistically, the usap-usap made prominent the flawless switching of the Filipino migrants between Tagalog, English, and Japanese as they contemplated their personal histories and exchanged opinions with one another. It is argued that multilingualism is an illustration of the migrant's multicultural reality, one that allows for the creative meshing of cultural ways from the origin and destination countries. Beyond the current research, the usap-usap served not only as a data-gathering tool for the current research but also as an avenue for the Filipino migrants to introspect, position themselves in relation to others, and co-construct an identity that is, at times, imposed on them by scholarly descriptions. Finally, the study demonstrated that discourse does not only reflect the transnational identity but also actively constructs it and makes it lucid, palpable, and more concrete.

*Keywords:* Transnational identity, discourse, Filipino migration, biculturalism, multilingualism

### **Introduction**

Filipinos comprise one of the largest migrant groups in Japan. According to the Immigration Services Agency of Japan (2023), a total of 322,046 Filipino nationals were registered in 2023, constituting close to 11% of the overall count of registered foreigners in the country. In terms of population size, Filipinos trail behind the Chinese, South Koreans, and Vietnamese. They live in various parts of Japan, with the highest concentrations being in Aichi, Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba. Moreover, the gradual lifting of strict COVID-19 border measures by Japan in late 2022 and early 2023 has put Japan in the vista of Filipinos who are planning to migrate for a variety of reasons.

Japan is an attractive destination for many emigrating Filipinos. Primary motivations for migration include employment, education, and family. Moreover, Japan's geographical proximity to and historical ties with the Philippines, soft power influence, and economic vibrancy are also significant considerations. Since the 1970s, the demographics of Filipino migrants have gradually changed, reflecting the changes in the demand for foreign labor by industries, as well as the Japanese society's aspiration to become increasingly globalized. The Cabinet Office of Japan (2004), in its 2004 white paper on the Japanese economy and public finance, underscored that a "comprehensive, forward-looking consideration in accepting more foreign workers is required" (translated). In particular, the foreign workforce was deemed as a remedy to the aging population dilemma. Foreign workers have since been actively accepted as their knowledge and technical abilities are envisioned to positively impact Japan's economic development. Japan's increasingly favorable stance towards accepting foreign workers, especially the so-called unskilled laborers, is reflected by the relaxation of some restrictions on quotas or periods of stay, as well as some linguistic requirements. Now, numerous Filipinos help propel the Japanese manufacturing and service industries, while a sizable number of them are found in the medical, construction, hospitality, and education sectors. Filipinos are also affiliated with Japanese academic and research institutions as professors, researchers, and students. The professors are employed in various universities and research centers across Japan, while the researchers are involved in scholarly and innovative activities in prestigious institutions centered around space technology, disaster mitigation, and agriculture. The population of Filipino students in Japan consists of individuals who enter language schools as a stepping stone for more long-term goals, undergraduate and graduate students, and research fellows—a good portion of whom eventually settle in Japan for gainful employment or to advance their careers. Family-related reasons also urge Filipinos to migrate to Japan. Some Filipinos move to Japan to join their family members who are already residing in the country as dependents or prospective workers. They include spouses or children of Filipinos who are holding permanent or long-term residency or Japanese nationals. Second-generation Japanese-Filipino children also come to Japan to (re)connect with their roots.

The composition of the Filipino migrant population in Japan has become more diversified, reflecting the diversification of opportunities for Filipinos to achieve their migration-related aspirations. Filipino migrants, moving away from the "pub worker" image ascribed to them by older generations of Japanese people, permeate different sectors of Japanese society to become not only economic, academic, and technological partners but also active members of the community who share innumerable common goals and aspirations with the locals. In so doing, and in the course of living in a foreign land, the Filipinos in Japan undergo transformations that permeate their identities—changes that go deep into the fabrics of one's and are reflected in how the Filipino transnationals view themselves, the others, and the world.

### **The Filipino Identity: Layered, Dynamic, and Socially Constructed**

The Philippines is a highly multi-ethnic and multilingual archipelago, and Filipinos who come to Japan also have varying ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Filipinos generally distinguish between their national and ethnolinguistic identities in the Philippines, which are internalized simultaneously. The word identity, however, is a very murky term. On a casual and perhaps digestible level, even for the layperson, identity answers the question, "Who am I?" (Motyl, 2010). However, this simplistic description defines identity in its accomplished state rather than characterizing it as a constantly dynamic and ongoing process. Moreover, it heavily focuses on the self as if it is definable without reference to others. Although written at a much earlier time and from a psychological point of view, Erikson (1968) formulated a definition of

identity that anticipated the current trends of identity research. He described identity as an internal organizing principle that steadily develops throughout an individual's lifespan—a principle that provides internal cohesion, a guide for interacting with others, and a frame for differentiating the self from the others. The social nature of identity is also captured by Hogg and Abrams' (1988) definition of identity: “people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (p. 2). Meanwhile, incorporating the dynamic nature of identity into its social dimension, Katzenstein (1996) defined identity as “mutually constructed and evolving images of the self and other” (p. 59). Identity studies have then significantly shifted at the turn of the twenty-first century. While classic research rested heavily on the conception of identity as static and stable, more recent studies take on a more anti-essentialist and social constructionist view (De Fina, 2016) and see identities as frequently fragmented and inconsistent (Baxter, 2016). A social constructivist conceptualization allows for a more nuanced understanding of the transformation of identities as driven by forces internal and external to the individual.

### **Simultaneity of Belongingness: The Transnational Identity**

Migration to Japan adds another layer to the Filipino identity. A well-explored research theme, cross-border migration has been known to affect an individual's identity. Theoretically, one can acquire the prevalent sociocultural identity in the receiving country or region or undergo identity modification by acculturation processes, given the appropriate conditions. Vertovec (2004) underscores how the cross-border experience creates cultural repertoires within the migrant and gives birth to ‘dual identities.’ Moreover, regardless of whether the transnational experience is sustained or not, the socialization process itself can leave “a substantial influence on longer-term configurations” of identity (Vertovec, 2009, p. 77).

In the same vein, Zhu (2017) describes this modification and blurring of identity as a sense of “double belonging” (or perhaps even multiple belonging), which stems from having transnational connections and exposure to social practices of more than one system. Living at the boundaries of two (or more) cultures, the identity construction of migrants is unquestionably affected by the meshing of different ways of living—the bicultural character of immigrants who must negotiate their two forms of cultural socialization is hence referred to as “transnational identity” (Esteban-Guitart & Ignasi, 2015).

In negotiating one's identity, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2003) identified three strategies for identity construction among migrants: 1) ethnic flight; 2) active opposition; and 3) biculturalism. In ethnic flight, migrants dissociate with the culture of their society of origin because they deem it “inferior” and strongly identify with the dominant culture. In active opposition, identity is built around retaliation towards the dominant culture, oftentimes underpinned by rejection and marginalization. Finally, biculturalism is the most adaptive strategy of identity construction where the migrants absorb elements of the different cultural systems (e.g., becoming multilingual) to become more successful in participating in their current cultural or social context. Biculturalism as an adaptive strategy is the backbone of the transnational identity of the migrant.

Filipinos, while living in Japan, can still maintain meaningful ties with their homeland by serializing and replicating practices commonly done in the Philippines in their daily lives (Tigno, 2008). Therefore, living away from the homeland results in a complex intertwining and interplay of various identities—ethnolinguistic, national, local, and occupational, to name a few—that are concomitantly pondered, lived, and articulated by the Filipino migrant in Japan. Examining how the many and multi-layered changes brought about by the transnational experience impact the Filipino identity is the subject of interest in this study.

## **Discourse: The Co-construction Site of Transnational Identity**

Previous studies on the identity of Filipinos in Japan focused on different types of migrants. Strands of research and academic articles tackled the identity of Japanese-Filipinos and Nikkeijins (Lemay, 2018; Seiger, 2019; Seiger, 2017; Ubalde, 2013; Vilog, 2013; Cafe, 2022; Almonte-Acosta, 2008; Zulueta, 2012), women (Ogaya, 2021; Magno, 2000; Faier, 2008; Ito, 2005; Suzuki, 2005; Suzuki, 2000; Okada, 2022; Docot, 2009) labor workers (Lopez, 2012), family (Tyner, 2002), Filipino teachers and ALTs (Balgoa, 2019; Stewart, 2019), and Filipinos as transnationals (Balgoa, 2017; Tigno, 2008). Generally, the studies cited above looked into the identity construction of particular groups of Filipino migrants that revolved primarily around how they negotiated their identities in the current domicile—against the predominant Japanese culture and the peculiarities of their spaces and places of being.

The co-construction process of transnational identity among individuals is affected by the configuration of interlocutors. For instance, power dynamics and prejudice between the interlocutors (Waugh, 2010), their pre-existing linguistic and social resources (Schilling-Estes, 2004), and their projected identity in relation to the “other” (Mieroop, 2008), affect how they co-construct their identities with the other participants of the discourse. The current study, however, is interested in the heterogeneity of the backgrounds of the interlocutors, specifically, how the Filipino transnational identity is co-constructed when the interlocutors come from highly varying backgrounds. When one ponders their identity, the act necessarily invokes a synchronous reflection of the self and the other and the relations between the two entities. The simultaneous rumination of identity based on the self and the other can be concretely induced by verbal exchanges among different interlocutors.

The current research adopts the more succinct and sociolinguistic stances taken by Bucholtz and Hall on identity (2005): 1) “Identity is the social positioning of the self and other” (p. 586), and 2) identity emerges from discourse. This view highlights the contingent nature of identity that adapts to the relation between the self and the other. Hence, identity becomes more understood as a sociocultural phenomenon rather than a fixture in the individual’s psyche. Bucholtz and Hall further add that identity is inherently relational, sociocultural, and partial. Most relevantly, they argue that the conception of the self and the other makes its way to the social world through some form of discourse. Identity then lends itself to scholarly scrutiny via the discourse made by interlocutors. Hence, identity is treated in this research as one that arises from discursive interactions. Discourse, as a commonplace social activity, renders identity in constant flux and vulnerable to alteration and modification through the different configurations of the interlocutors. For Feller (2014), identity is the outcome of “a dialog of cultures” that involves negotiations or co-constructions. As the construction of identity is a joint activity, no one has full control over its outcome.

Incorporating these theoretical orientations, this research intends to analyze, using discourse, 1) how Filipino migrants describe their transnational identity individually and 2) how they co-construct their transnational identity with fellow Filipino migrants from other backgrounds. Discourse, a social activity that allows people to unpack their identities, can be a site of dispute and agreement, as well as a site for the rethinking and aligning of identities.

Identity becomes more concrete and substantial through the verbalization of thoughts of the speakers. Through interpersonal communication and narrative, it becomes more tangible and comprehensible. In a social constructivist perspective, the particulars of the setting and the discourse styles influence how identity is conceptually established. Identity, in this sense, is not simply an attribute assumed by individuals or an inherent property of the self that is stable and unchanging but rather a malleable facet that is constantly subjected to social forces and



agency. While cultural identities, such as the Filipino identity, have histories, they are also an entity of the present and the future simultaneously and are therefore expected to undergo transformation (Hall, 1990). The transformation is best reflected by stories and narratives of the Filipino migrant, who is both an agent and the receiving end of change. Storytelling highlights the individual's unique experiences that shape their transnational identity. On the other hand, discourse is deemed a site of agreeing and disagreeing, as well as aligning and renegotiating transnational identities. In this sense, *usap-usap* can be deemed helpful in the current study. *Usap-usap* is a Tagalog word that means 'light conversation'. In the spectrum of formality and casualness, *usap-usap* is situated in the middle—less formal than an interview yet less casual than gossiping or chit-chatting. It has a structure built around a central topic, but it also accommodates divergence from the theme and spontaneous talk. In the study, it refers to an intimate yet meaningful exchange of stories, narratives, and opinions around the central theme of “transnational identity”—between the informant and the researcher and among the informants themselves—concerning realities and lives as they unfold.

### Research Questions and Methodology

The current research aims to answer three questions:

1. How do Filipino migrants co-construct their transnational identity through discourse?
2. Do Filipino migrants see their transnational identity as advantageous or disadvantageous?
3. What are the linguistic and non-linguistic strategies employed in the discursive co-construction of transnational identity?

The study used purposive sampling to gather four (4) informants. Informants were Filipino migrants residing in the Kanto area of Japan, belonging to different categories: 1) highly skilled workers; 2) educators (e.g., university professors, ALTs, school teachers, language teachers); 3) students (e.g., university, research, and graduate students); and 4) family members of a Japanese national (e.g., *hafu* or mixed children and spouses). A small number was opted for to allow for a more nuanced and detailed investigation of the informants' identity construction process.

*Usap-usap* served as the data-gathering method and was conducted on two levels: 1) between the researcher and each informant and 2) among all the informants. The two levels of *usap-usap* were facilitated and recorded through Zoom meetings. The first-level interviews lasted for around an hour each, while the second-level interview lasted for around 2 hours. The informants were allowed to use Tagalog, English, Japanese, or a combination of these languages, as they deemed comfortable.

In the first-level interviews, each informant was asked about their migration story, how they view themselves, and how their views about themselves changed in the course of staying in Japan. The discussion also included how they adjusted to their new domicile, as well as how they navigated through the linguistic and cultural differences between Japan and the Philippines. Then, the four informants were invited to participate in the second-level interview, which is the focus group discussion (FGD). The salient and recurring points gathered in the first-level interviews served as the discussion points in the FGD. The discussion enabled the heterogeneous group to discourse identities through dynamic and more proactive exchanges. Through the sharing of narratives, informants could react to one another, question the views of other informants, and ponder their thoughts by comparing those with other perspectives. In the discussion, the exchange of narratives in the focus group discussion allowed the researcher to

identify linguistic devices that serve the informants' interactional goals and intention to construct particular images of themselves (Pavlenko, 2007).

## Findings

Pseudonym	Code	Category	Age	Sex	Years Living in Japan
“Senior Manager”	SM	Highly Skilled Workers	38	Female	16
“Homeroom Teacher”	HT	Educators	34	Female	9
“Doctoral Student”	DS	Students	32	Male	4
“Entrepreneur”	EN	Family Member of a Japanese National	51	Female	27

**Figure 1. The Demographics of the Informants**

The table above shows the demographic characteristics of the informants of the study. Four Filipino nationals, aged 32 to 51, participated in the individual interviews and group discussions. Three were females, and one was male. The participants' length of stay in Japan ranged from four to 27 years. The informants were identified through purposive sampling. Individual interviews and a focus group discussion were conducted for the data gathering. The individual interviews lasted approximately an hour each, while the group discussion was held for two hours.

In the individual interviews, the researcher probed into the personal histories of the informants. Specifically, the informants were asked to talk about their migration story, their motivations for moving to Japan, and the circumstances surrounding their decision to do so.

Furthermore, the embodiment of the Filipino identity in various spaces in Japan—the public, the local community, the workplace, the corporate world, and the academe, among many others—was discussed. How the informants navigated through life in Japan and pondered their transnational identity was also investigated using Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco's (2003) framework, categorizing experiences as falling under ethnic flight, active opposition, or biculturalism.

## Motivations for Moving to Japan

The motivations for moving to Japan were varied: SM and DS came to Japan primarily to pursue higher education, arriving in Japan in 2008 and 2020, respectively. SM eventually landed a job at a multinational pharmaceutical company after finishing her studies, while DS

is currently pursuing a Ph.D. degree at a university in Tokyo. SM had a clear goal of becoming the first Filipino to pass a certain licensure exam in Japan and endeavored to set an example for fellow aspiring Filipino scholars. She currently occupies a senior manager position at a Tokyo-based company, allowing her to travel around the world for business-related matters. On the other hand, DS first came to Japan as an exchange student in Tokyo in 2015 and has since frequently visited the country for leisure and work-related reasons. He eventually came back in 2020 to pursue a master's degree in Tokyo while engaging in cultural exchange activities between ASEAN and Japan.

Meanwhile, HT came to Japan in 2015 to work as an English teacher at a high school in Ibaraki. She has been working at the same school for nine years and has recently become a class adviser, a relatively rare feat for foreign teachers in Japan. For HT, moving to Japan allowed her independence and full control over her life decisions. Finally, EN married a Japanese national, prompting her to settle in Japan in 1998. She has worked in the corporate world and has then become an entrepreneur, shuttling back and forth between Japan and the Philippines to manage businesses and socio-civic activities.

### **Ethnic Flight and Active Opposition**

An outstanding instance of ethnic flight was shared by HT in the individual interview:

Extract 1

HT: To be honest, siguro nung sa unang mga taon ko rito, I'd say na itinapon ko 'yung pagka-Pilipino ko in a way... medyo ikinahiya ko at some point 'yung pagiging Filipino. Umabot ako sa point na naging 'Japanese' ako in a way. (To be honest, during the first few years of living here, I'd say I threw away my being Filipino...I was somewhat ashamed of being Filipino. It reached a point where I became 'Japanese' [as a result]."

HT shared experiences of being negatively stereotyped in the community. According to her, people in the school equated the Philippines with the production of bananas and Filipinos with female entertainers working at the omise (bar). She also recalled a remark from a student who said, "Oh, there's a university in the Philippines?". The embarrassment from such stereotypes and the lack of Filipino community around, according to HT, affected her self-esteem and drove her to adhere more to the dominant culture—to be more Japanese-like in the workplace. However, HT said that her friends from the Philippines migrating to Japan became a turning point in her life—she felt reconnected with her roots and began to embrace being Filipino through her Filipino social network.

As for active opposition, no narratives describing strong or violent retaliation towards the dominant culture, stemming from rejection or marginalization, were obtained from the informants. Instead, instances of microaggressions and discriminatory treatment from the dominant population in their spaces of being were redressed by the informants through biculturalism strategies. The most adaptive of the three strategies, biculturalism paves the way for the creation of transnational identities that allow migrants to thrive better in the new environment.

### **Biculturalism and the Discursive Co-Construction of Filipino Transnational Identity**

The group discussion centered on the exchange of opinions on what the Filipino transnational identity vis-à-vis migration to Japan is. Using the recurrent and/or salient themes of identity construction determined through the individual interviews, the researcher engaged the informants to closely examine the varying biculturalism strategies that underpin the emergence of a transnational identity.

Biculturalism was predominantly observed in the following discourse themes: religiosity and spirituality, blending in with Japanese society, and linguistic adaptation.

### **Spirituality and Religiosity**

#### Extract 2

SM: Ever since I came to Japan, I have [had] a dedicated space for my altar. Nandun yung prayer area ko (That is my prayer area). During COVID, I was not able to go to the community service sa Roppongi (in Roppongi). I would just basically go to the altar space and that is my way of keeping my Filipino identity.

The Philippines is known to be chiefly Catholic, and religiosity has long been associated with the Filipino identity. However, Catholics are a small minority in Japan, and spaces for prayers and worship, such as churches, are few and far between. Although the informants acknowledge that, by and large, religiosity is part of Filipino life, their practice of religion in Japan has diverged from that in the Philippines.

#### Extract 3

HT: Personally lang, sa akin, hindi kasi ako nagpapractice ng Catholicism or Christianity, even before coming here to Japan. I believe in [a] god, pero hindi ako ‘yung typical na Catholic or Christian natin. It’s actually funny because mas nafieel ko yung presence ng almighty being sa mga shrines and temples. Hindi ako ganun ka-Japanese na Japanese but I feel that it’s sacred. (Personally, I don’t practice Catholicism or Christianity even before coming to Japan. I believe in a god, but I am not the typical Catholic or Christian. It’s actually funny because I feel the presence of an almighty being in shrines and temples. I am not really Japanese but I feel that it’s sacred.)

#### Extract 4

EN: I am a practicing Catholic but I’d like to [say that I’m more] spiritual kasi hindi ako masyadong religious. Ako din, I always go to the temples...I practice meditation kasi. Walang dedicated [space] for the Catholic practice sa bahay ko. (I am a practicing Catholic but I’d like to [say that I’m more] spiritual than religious. I always go to the temples too...because I practice meditation. There is no dedicated [space] for Catholic practice in my house.)

#### Extract 5

DS: Jumping [in], you have religiosity and spirituality. It is actually so much easier to be spiritual here in Japan because you have spaces...the atmosphere is there.

SM has a prayer space in her apartment, serving as a sacred space for practicing religion even during the pandemic. However, HT, EN, and DS, who are not strictly practicing religion, agreed that Japan is conducive to nurturing one’s spirituality, not necessarily religiosity. The relatively weaker presence of Catholicism or Christianity and the scarcity of its representative edifices in Japan may prompt Filipino migrants to build alternative spaces for worship. On the other hand, the ubiquity and sacred atmosphere of shrines and temples in Japan may spur migrants who do not strictly practice religion to explore their spirituality and adhere to local ways of observing ethereality. DS also pointed out that attention to the practice of religion among Filipinos in Japan should also be extended to followers of Islam.

### **Adapting to Japanese Culture and Language**

#### Extract 6

HT: In general, magaling tayong mag-adapt sa environment natin. Sa Japan, super rule followers, super punctual. (In general, we are good at adapting to our environment. In Japan, we are rule followers, super punctual.)

Extract 7

DS: 空気を読める. Nakikisabay tayu. (We read the room. We keep pace with them).

HT and DS underscored the high capability of Filipinos to adapt to a new culture or environment. In relation to this, one of the topics that the informants discussed was the so-called “Filipino time,” or the tendency of Filipinos to be tardy to an agreed meeting time. In Japan, where being punctual is observed and inculcated at a young age among Japanese people, “Filipino time” becomes untenable, hence prodding the informants to be timelier in their personal and professional endeavors. Aside from the refitted punctuality, the informants also cited various Japanese ways of doing that they adapted in their spaces of being in order to blend in.

Extract 8

SM: For the migrants in Japan, it’s not only the culture, we also have to understand the language in order to blend in. We are more flexible.

Extract 9

EN: Based on my observation, the Japanese would expect Filipinos to adjust to the language [used here].

Extract 10

DS: Learning the language gives us power and control.

In a similar vein, Filipinos’ adaptability is also evidenced by the migrants’ success in developing a functional level or even mastery of the Japanese language. EN shared that the Japanese people in her circles expect Filipinos to be conversant in the Japanese language. SM, whose schooling had Japanese as the medium of instruction, agreed that in order to keep pace with colleagues, linguistic mastery is essential. She also added that Filipino migrants in Japan face the additional challenge of mastering an unfamiliar language, as opposed to those who are living in countries such as the United Kingdom or the United States of America, who have the convenience of using English, a known second or third language in the Philippines. DS argued that learning Japanese is not only a means to get by in Japanese society but also imbues the migrant with some power and control, pulling them out of the subordinate position where they are relegated by default. He also added, however, that not all migrants acquire the pen-and-paper proficiency of Japanese, yet they are able to grasp the performative aspects of communication or the use of gestures, facial expressions, and body language. Ultimately, HT, EN, and SM agreed that mastery of Japanese allows the migrant to set foot into the more intimate and privileged spaces of Japanese society, where language serves as the gatekeeper.

Extract 11

SM: Based on my experience、 almost all the Japanese I’ve met, what they’re saying is like “多分昔日本人だと思います、昔の人生は” (Maybe you were Japanese in your previous life)...That’s how they look at me, even though I don’t look like a typical Japanese but then,

like, for me the way I think, the way I express, although I still have Filipinoness in me, they associate my way of thinking, [my] strategy when it comes to work, it's very Japanese.

The informants shared experiences of being praised for being similar to the Japanese in their spaces. Japanese people note how relatively easier it is for the Filipino migrants to adapt to the local ways, according to the informants. This can be seen in behaviors, attitudes, perspectives, and local ways of doing things. Yet, when asked whether a Filipino migrant can become “Japanese” given enough time, there were some disagreements among the informants. SM argued that it might be possible if the compliments from the Japanese were taken as the sole validation. The other informants concurred that the fabric of being Filipino will always remain, and that the closest a Filipino migrant can be would be 日本人っぽい (nihonjin ppoi) or 日本人みたい (nihonin mitai), both meaning “Japanese-like.”

### **The Filipino Transnational Identity: Advantageous and Beneficial**

Building on the idea that “Filipino migrants can never become Japanese,” the informants were asked whether being bicultural—or transnational—is advantageous or disadvantageous. A consensus that living a bicultural, or even multicultural, life is more beneficial was forwarded by the informants.

#### Extract 12

DS: The Filipino side also gives us, I think, more room, more space to kind of act, navigate, and strategize... We can do things that a Japanese person never can, or we can enter spaces that Japanese people never can.

#### Extract 13

HT: Madiskarte tayo. We find ways to think outside the box...Hindi tayo ganun katakot magfail. Mas nakakapagsurvive tayo with those qualities as Filipinos in Japan. (We are resourceful. We find ways to think outside the box...We are not afraid to fail. With those qualities as Filipinos, we can survive better in Japan.)

#### Extract 14

SM: It's still advantageous to maintain this kind of Filipinoness within us because that basically expand[s] our horizons and perspectives in dealing with things... Same here in Japan, I've never forgotten my roots, my Chinese and Filipino roots, because I think in some cases I was able to apply, you know, those mindset[s] and perspective[s], which is, sometimes, [the] Japanese wouldn't have thought [of]... thinking out of the box.. If you have this kind of different mindset, like Chineseness or Filipinoness or whatever it may be, it is good to incorporate that because you might create something new or innovative, instead of just following one culture.

The informants agreed that possessing cultural capital from both Filipino and Japanese culture (and Chinese culture, in SM's case) affords them more resources to deal with the challenges of living in a foreign country. Moreover, it allows them to analyze and solve problems in noble ways, creatively mixing multiple cultural perspectives. Knowledge of multiple languages, for instance, puts them in a position to learn from both cultures as well as to engage in both societies. The bicultural nature of the Filipino migrant enables them to penetrate spaces that neither nonmigrating Filipinos nor Japanese people can enter and use intangible cultural resources as they deem appropriate for the situation at hand.

#### Extract 15

EN: Tayong mga Pilipino kasi (We, Filipinos), even in the hardest situations, we always find ways to [have] fun... I think that's what makes us adaptable to any situation at any given time. Tayo kasi kahit nahihirapan (Even if we're going through rough times), we know how to be creative. We entertain ourselves... we try to make it lighter.

Finally, the informants embraced the impression from Japanese peers that Filipino migrants are 明るい (akarui) or full of vitality. For EN, this is an essential quality of Filipinos that tides them over difficult times. For the informants, it is a Filipino character that is evaluated positively in Japanese society and multicultural settings. Hence, it is one that is advantageous to keep and equips the Filipino migrants with a positive edge in their spaces of being.

**Non-Linguistic and Linguistic Dimensions of the Discourse on Transnational Identity**

In the group discussion, the informants employed non-linguistic and linguistic means to co-construct the transnational identity through discourse. As for the non-linguistic dimension, the informants expressed agreement through nodding, smiling, and even laughing, in exchanges where they agreed with opinions heard. Disagreement, on the other hand, was not evidently expressed through gestures and facial expressions.

As for the linguistic dimension, the informants employed the following expressions to express agreement, elaboration or takeoff, and disagreement:

Agreement	Elaboration/Takeoff	Disagreement
I agree with what X said that...	Jumping in...	Sa akin naman (For me/In my experience...)
I couldn't agree more with X...	If I may add...	Based on my experience...
If I may add...	Based on my experience...	I can give another perspective...
Tama 'yung sinabi ni X na... (What X said was right that...)	Thank you for pointing that out/sharing that...	Not to discredit X but...
	Sa akin naman (For me/In my experience...)	Opinion ko lang... (My two cents...)
	あとは (ato wa)... (Moreover; Also)	

**Figure 2. Linguistic Expressions Used in the Discourse on Transnational Identity**

It can be observed that the expressions used were primarily English. However, some expressions were also Tagalog or code-switches between Tagalog and English. Finally, one Japanese expression was used. Although generally varying in terms of background—occupation, age, sex, and length of stay in Japan— there were numerous points of agreement in the exchange of opinions among the informants. However, the differences in backgrounds also

brought them to disagree with one another on certain occasions. The informants also built on one another's opinions when the narrative they heard resonated with them, sharing a different perspective or experience related to the topic at hand. The informants noticeably used respectful language, with no outright expressions of disagreement or strongly phrased disapproval. In describing the character and experiences of Filipino migrants en masse, they oftentimes used the Tagalog word *tayo* (we) which indicates inclusive narration. This inclusive narration reflected some generalizing views which the informants respectfully disagreed with at some points in the discussion, but also accepted on most occasions.

Most strikingly, the discussion was done in a flawless switching of Tagalog, English and Japanese. While the informants used mostly Tagalog in the discourse, the natural and instinctive switching between languages reflects the multilingual propensity of Filipino migrants. It is a manifestation of the bicultural, or even multicultural, reality of the Filipino migrant that is pieced together by their various experiences, needs, and aspirations as human beings living far away from their homeland. Multilingualism, therefore, is a stark manifestation of the transnational identity. Through the mundane activity of discourse, whether controlled or not, multilingualism is observed and hence, the emergent transnational identity becomes more lucid and palpable.

## **Discussion**

The backgrounds of the informants and their motivations for moving to Japan were characterized by diversity, which also led to the variety of transnational experiences described. Highlighted was the co-construction of the transnational identity by a group of Filipino migrants with varying backgrounds, setting the current study apart from previous ones that focused on relatively homogeneous groups of Filipinos in Japan. The discourse among the respondents revealed how they negotiated their identities through the course of living in Japan, their current domicile, and how their varying backgrounds, motivations, and environments played a role in their continuing transformations. Following the identity negotiation strategies of migrants described by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2003), the study found only one instance of ethnic flight, while no narratives showing active opposition were obtained. For the most part, the informants shared narratives exhibiting biculturalism strategies, as reflected in how they modified their practices vis-à-vis spirituality and religiosity, punctuality, and linguistic differences between the Philippines and Japan. Previously described as dual identity (Vertovec, 2004) or double belonging (Zhu, 2017), or negotiation of cultural socializations (Esteban-Guitart & Ignasi, 2015), the synchronous absorption of elements from Japanese culture and the preservation of elements from Filipino culture that result in the emergence of a transnational identity are deemed advantageous by the informants. For them, the resulting pool of cultural resources equips the Filipino migrant with diverse advantages in their spaces of being and constitutes a reason to be proud of their transnational identities.

In terms of the discourse specifics, non-linguistic and linguistic expressions were used in the co-construction of transnational identity. Non-linguistic cues included facial and body gestures, while the linguistic cues consisted of agreement, elaboration or takeoff, and disagreement phrases. In addition, essentializing became crucial in the discursive co-construction of Filipino transnational identity. This was as demonstrated by the informants' frequent use of the Tagalog inclusive pronominal *tayo* while discussing Filipino migrants' experiences in Japan. Essentializing played an important role in helping the informants consider their own experiences and determine whether or not their personal ideas of transnational identity could be applied generally. The spontaneous exchange of opinions reflected the unpredictability of



identity co-construction (Feller, 2014) and showed the social positioning of informants among themselves during the discourse, as well as in the social worlds they belong to beyond the current conversation.

The current study does not generalize but mainly characterizes the transnational identity from the puzzle pieces of experiences from the informants. Hence, it is expected that the transnational identity that will be co-constructed from other configurations of informants will be different. As Baxter (2016) argued, identity can be inconsistent and fragmented, and this can be observed in the varying discourses that the migrants engage themselves in. Put concisely, migrants expectedly construct and present a different identity depending on the nature of discourse, the interlocutors involved, and the space of discourse, among many other factors.

## **Conclusion**

The usap-usap with and among the informants of the study provided an insightful look into how Filipino migrants living in Japan reflected on their transnational identity through the exchange of narratives and opinions. While numerous scholars have described the migrant using labels such as neither here nor there, in-between, and on the edge, consequently signaling some state of identity crisis or disadvantaged position, the informants viewed their current transnational lifestyle more positively than otherwise. However, the discourse among the informants did not show any intention to invalidate the reality of the less privileged migrants and those living in precarious conditions; in fact, the informants in the study also recounted stories of struggles during the early days of their migration, which, in a way, contributed to the process of eventually embracing their bicultural nature. There was also an acknowledgment that undesirable experiences are part and parcel of the migrant experience, a reality that is no different from that of the locals. Nevertheless, the creative meshing of cultural ways from the origin and destination countries endows the Filipino migrants with a competitive edge in their occupational spaces and bestows them with a deep pool of ingenious resources for dealing with the challenges of living away from their homeland—a leverage that individuals who do not have transnational experience lack.

The findings of the study contribute to the growing research on transnational identities. Understanding how transnational individuals form their self-conceptions can provide valuable insights into migration and globalization—macro-processes realized by transnational individuals and their activities. This bottom-up approach gives prominence to the nuanced experiences of transnational individuals, yielding knowledge that can complement analysis starting with the state or its institutions. Findings from studies on transnational identities also have wider social, cultural, economic, political, educational, and policy implications, among many others. For instance, data gathered from transnational identities can be used in creating programs that relate to migrant concerns, such as education, mental health, and jobs. Understanding derived from academic outputs such as the current one can also help states in formulating well-informed policies that foster smoother social and cultural integration for migrants while protecting their dignity against prejudicial forces in the society.

Beyond the current research, the usap-usap served not only as a data-gathering tool for the current research but also as an avenue for the Filipino migrants to introspect, position themselves in relation to others, and co-construct an identity that is, at times, imposed on them by scholarly descriptions. Setting a stage for migrants, especially the underrepresented and socially isolated communities, to engage in an exchange of narratives allows them to “author their own versions of their experiences” (De Fina and Tseng, 2017, p.382). The usap-usap also highlighted the migrant as a reflexive and agentive being with the capacity to realize that their

identities are constantly in flux—not a fixture, but something that they do and actively create (Butler, 1990).

Finally, the study emphasizes the importance of examining discourses that give form and shape to identities. In the current research, the activity of discoursing served as an avenue for the migrants to contemplate their histories and trajectories, evaluate their realities in relation to themselves and the others, and name their experiences, which would otherwise be unarticulated. The discourse became the birthing ground for the transnational identity that the informants co-constructed from their active exchange of narratives and thoughts and through agreements, disagreements, and negotiations. Discourse, as it unfolds, does not only reflect the transnational identity but also actively constructs it and makes it lucid, palpable, and more concrete.

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## The Potential and Implications of AI-Generated Feedback for Primary School Composition Writing

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### Abstract

Effective writing instruction requires regular and detailed feedback; however, it is not always easy to provide effective feedback and the provision of such feedback can be taxing for teachers (Bai et al., 2013). Singapore’s Ministry of Education (MOE) has leveraged Artificial Intelligence (AI) – in the form of automated writing evaluation (AWE) systems in language classrooms – to provide basic feedback on students’ writing in areas such as spelling and grammar which will allow teachers to focus on “guiding students in the more complex aspects of language construction, and to develop higher-level skills like creative expression, persuasiveness and tone” (MOE, 2023). In this paper, we are taking a critical and evaluative look in a richly contextualised setting at whether Generative AI (GAI) platforms, such as Gemini, can indeed fill the gap to provide feedback on higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and organisation (Gupta et al., 2024). We address two research questions: (1) To what extent can GAI provide effective feedback on continuous writing tasks for primary school students in Singapore? (2) What are the potential implications of GAI-generated feedback on writing instruction? In our analysis of feedback patterns, GAI consistently focuses on content and style, suggesting improvements such as richer vocabulary and stronger conclusions, without actually providing clear examples. GAI also exhibits a lack of personalisation, not using personal pronouns or highlighting student strengths. Additional prompts from teachers are required to elicit more granular feedback and a more positive tone. Lastly, while GAI can assess essays based on a given rubric, it struggles with evaluating narrative structure, requiring further teacher guidance. Overall, GAI has the potential to be a valuable tool in language and writing classrooms, offering a starting point for feedback that requires both teacher expertise and teachers’ digital literacy to personalise and refine.

*Keywords:* Feedback, Generative Artificial Intelligence, Continuous Writing, Writing Instruction

### Introduction

Assessment plays a crucial role in teaching as it serves to provide information that is crucial to improving learning (Wong et. al., 2020). In the past decade, there has been a shift in the education landscape in Singapore as there have been major national educational initiatives implemented that place a strong emphasis on Assessment for Learning (AfL) and Assessment of Learning (AoL), which refer to formative and summative assessment respectively (Wong et. al., 2020).

Feedback is a crucial part of AfL as it allows for learning gaps to be closed. Feedback is “information provided by an agent...regarding aspects of one’s performance” (Hattie &

Timperley, 2007, p.81), and ‘a process through which learners make sense of information from various sources and use it to enhance their work’ (Carless & Boud, 2018, p.1315). Effective writing instruction requires regular and detailed feedback; however, it is not always easy to provide effective feedback due to gaps in writing teachers’ feedback literacy (Lee, 2021), and the feedback cycle might require a lot of time on the part of educators (Bai et. al., 2013).

With Artificial Intelligence (AI) quickly establishing itself as a crucial and transformative force in various industries in the past year, AI in Education (AIED) has been the focus of many studies (Zhang & Aslan, 2021). Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) is a subset of AI that focuses on generating novel content such as text, code, or creative content forms. One example of GAI is Gemini (formerly Bard), a system that demonstrates advanced capabilities in natural language processing, allowing it to analyze text, identify strengths and weaknesses, and offer feedback on various aspects of writing, including grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure (Gemini Team, 2023). GAI holds much promise for assisting teachers in various tasks, including providing automated feedback on student writing (Gupta et. al., 2024).

Recent systematic reviews of AIED have shown an upward trend in both regional and global adoption of AI applications in primary education. These applications span a wide spectrum, encompassing those for adaptive learning and personalised tutoring, intelligent assessment and management, profiling and prediction (Wang et al., 2024). AI is also prominently featured in the EdTech Masterplan 2030 by Singapore’s Ministry of Education (MOE). The plan has leveraged new technologies by launching AI features in the Singapore Student Learning Space (SLS), an online learning portal used by schools, which is meant to “customise students’ learning experiences and augment the guidance given by teachers” (MOE, 2023). Two Learning Feedback Assistants - Language Feedback Assistant for English (LangFA-EL) and the Short Answer Feedback Assistant (ShortAnsFA) - were launched in December 2023. The LangFA-EL can provide basic feedback on students’ writing in areas such as spelling and grammar which will allow teachers to focus on “guiding students in the more complex aspects of language construction, and to develop higher-level skills like creative expression, persuasiveness and tone” (MOE, 2023). On the other hand, the ShortAnsFA focuses on close-ended and short-answer questions. It can provide suggested grades and auto-generated content-related feedback which allows teachers to shorten feedback time by using the AI-generated feedback and grades as a draft that they can edit and build on. At this time, there are no studies detailing the performance and shortfalls of LangFA-EL or ShortAnsFA. However, MOE (2023) issues the disclaimers “As LangFA-EL and ShortAnsFA uses generative AI, its response is probabilistic in nature and this results in it being inaccurate at times...Bear in mind that LangFA-EL and ShortAnsFA may have also missed some errors”. Therefore, it remains an open question if AI can actually produce quality feedback that is useful and effective for teaching and learning.

## Research Gap

While the potential of GAI for automated feedback in writing is gaining traction, significant research gaps remain, particularly regarding its efficacy and implementation in specific educational contexts. The use of GAI is a relatively recent development; thus, limited research exists on the use of GAI for feedback in the Singaporean education system, especially within the specific context of primary school composition writing, which often emphasizes specific content and language features aligned with the Singapore curriculum. Current research on GAI for writing feedback primarily focuses on higher education settings or general-purpose writing tasks. These studies often highlight the limitations of GAI systems in providing feedback on

higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and organization (Gupta et. al., 2024).

This study aims to address the research gap by focusing on the potential of GAI, specifically Gemini, in providing feedback on continuous writing for Singaporean primary school students. It is important here to note that while the MOE feedback systems do allow for basic feedback focusing on form (grammar, spelling) in short-answer questions, this study aims to investigate the possibility of using GAI to provide feedback on higher-level skills like creativity, stylistic choices and content.

## Research Questions

This study addresses two primary research questions: (1) To what extent can GAI provide effective feedback on continuous writing tasks for primary school students in Singapore? and (2) What are the potential implications of GAI-generated feedback on the teaching and learning process in Singaporean primary school composition writing?

The first question delves into the effectiveness and accuracy of Gemini's feedback. It will investigate whether the feedback provided by Gemini aligns with established grading rubrics used in Singaporean primary schools and whether it can offer constructive suggestions and effective feedback for improvement. This will also address issues of writing teachers' feedback literacy, and the time pressures in the feedback cycle.

The second question focuses on the wider impact of GAI-generated feedback on the learning process and student engagement. It will explore how GAI feedback might influence students' understanding of writing concepts, their approaches to revising their writing and self-reflection, and their overall motivation and engagement with writing tasks. This question also investigates potential opportunities and challenges associated with using GAI feedback, such as fostering self-directed learning, promoting deeper comprehension, and addressing potential concerns related to overdependence or reliance on technology and ethical concerns about AIED.

This research has the potential to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on the ethical and pedagogical implications of utilizing AI in education. By addressing these research questions, this study aims to provide valuable information for educators and policymakers in considering the integration of GAI for feedback in classrooms, while also highlighting considerations for maximizing its effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

After analyzing the data, a few main recurring patterns were found. A key takeaway from analyzing Gemini's feedback patterns is that it offers consistency in certain areas while requiring teacher intervention in others. Consistently, Gemini focuses on content and style, suggesting improvements like richer vocabulary and stronger conclusions. It also identifies specific action points for improvement but may lack clear examples. To address this, teachers might need to provide additional prompts to elicit more granular feedback from Gemini. Another consistent feature is Gemini's lack of personalization. It doesn't use personal pronouns or highlight student strengths. Educators can address this by prompting Gemini for a more positive tone or by personalizing the feedback themselves to manage students' emotional receptiveness. Finally, while Gemini can assess essays based on a rubric, it seems to have limitations in addressing overall narrative structure. Teachers may need to provide additional guidance in this area. Overall, Gemini appears to be a valuable tool for educators, offering a starting point for feedback that requires teacher expertise to personalize and refine.

## Literature Review

### Feedback Types

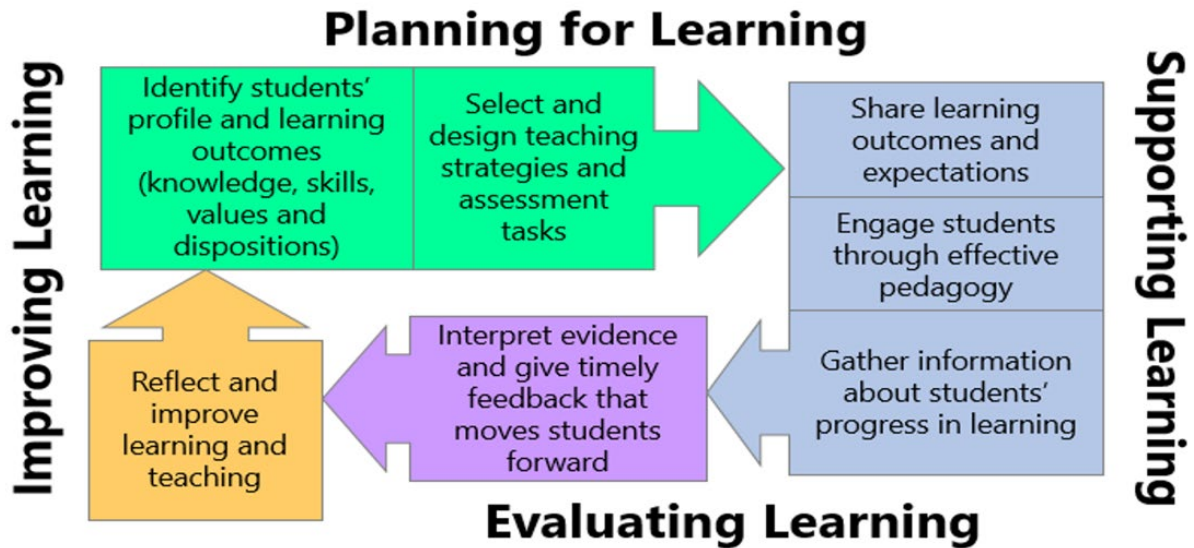
Feedback in an education/writing context is traditionally classified into several categories based on its purpose and nature. Two important distinctions are formative vs. summative feedback and direct vs. indirect feedback. Direct feedback provides explicit corrections or suggestions, while in indirect feedback, the instructor indicates that an error exists but does not provide the correction (Lalande, 1982). Formative feedback focuses on improving the learner's skills and understanding during the writing process, and is iterative. In contrast, summative feedback evaluates the final product, often in the form of grades or comprehensive comments summarising the strengths and weaknesses of the piece (Bloom et. al., 1971). AI-generated feedback can theoretically fit in all these established categories, especially when given explicit prompts to act in certain specific ways. For instance, while many AI writing tools such as Grammarly and Gemini inherently provide direct feedback (such as suggesting corrections for grammar or word choice), they can be given instructions to only offer indirect feedback (such as identifying areas that lack clarity or coherence) without explicitly dictating how to fix them. AI tools are naturally compatible with formative feedback, as it can provide continuous and iterative input during the drafting and writing process. AI systems can also generative summative feedback, but this is less common and has to be based on predefined rubrics or criteria.

### Assessment for Learning (AfL)

There has been extensive research done that validates the efficacy of AfL practices and shows that there is a possibility of significant learning improvement when AfL is part of teachers' classroom practices (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Brookhart, Moss, & Long, 2009; Carless, 2012; Heritage, 2007; Leahy & Wiliam, 2012; Natriello, 1987; Wiliam, 2011; Wiliam & Leahy, 2015, as cited in ELIS, 2018). In Singapore, the implementation of AfL was based on the work of Black and William (1998) in which the central tenet focused on four key activities — sharing success criteria with learners, classroom questioning, comment-only marking and peer- and self-assessment (ELIS, 2018). From that, three key processes for feedback were highlighted: (1) where the learners are in their learning, (2) where they are going and (3) what needs to be done to get them there. MOE (2013) has also introduced the concept of an assessment-feedback learning cycle as seen in Figure 1 below.

### Figure 1. MOE Assessment-Feedback Learning Cycle





As part of the Singapore Teaching Practice (STP), MOE also encourages the use of the teaching action, “Comment only feedback” (STP, 2024). This teaching action has teachers providing comments that are substantial and clear enough to guide students in improving their work without depriving them of the chance to do the work or to think about the solution themselves. In order to achieve this, it was suggested that comments can be phrased as questions which can aid in scaffolding students’ thinking to take ownership of their own learning. It states that there should not be feedback at the self-level as it is ineffective because it focuses on personal evaluations and affects. For example, compliments like “well done” or “good job” simply do not provide any information on how students can improve their performance on the given task and can direct attention away from the task, process or self-regulation levels. Additionally, the STP discourages the use of judgmental feedback with words that imply blame, fault, mistake, and incompetence as teachers should seek to build a positive classroom culture that can encourage students' participation and co-construction (STP, 2024).

### **Nicol & Macfarlane-Dicks’s Principles of Feedback (2006)**

Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue for a shift towards student-centered feedback practices in educational settings. They contend that traditional approaches, where teachers solely "transmit" feedback to students, are insufficient to promote self-regulated learning, a crucial skill for lifelong learning. Their model emphasizes the importance of students actively interpreting, responding to, and generating feedback, including self-assessment and feedback from peers and teachers. This student-centered approach acknowledges the cognitive, motivational, and behavioural aspects of learning. Effective feedback, according to the authors, should address all three aspects to facilitate meaningful learning.

Nicol and Marfarlene-Dick (2006) propose seven principles for effective feedback, each one addressing the cognitive, motivational and behavioural aspects of self-regulation:

1. Clarity of Goals and Criteria: Providing clear examples, criteria sheets, and opportunities for discussion about expectations helps students understand what good performance looks like.
2. Facilitating Self-Assessment: Encouraging students to self-assess their work, either individually or with peers, promotes reflection and ownership of learning.

3. **High-Quality Information:** Feedback should be timely, specific, and actionable, focusing on improvement rather than solely highlighting strengths and weaknesses.
4. **Encouraging Dialogue:** Peer discussions and classroom conversations about feedback can enhance understanding and solidify learning.
5. **Positive Motivation and Self-Esteem:** Feedback should encourage effort and progress, emphasizing the learning process over grades.
6. **Closing the Performance Gap:** Providing opportunities for resubmission, retaking quizzes, and identifying action points helps students bridge the gap between their current and desired performance.
7. **Informing Teaching:** Effective feedback practices provide teachers with valuable data to adapt and improve instruction.

These principles can also be seen in the key characteristics of effective feedback that are highlighted in ELIS (2018):

1. Feedback should give the learner information about the assignment or the process of learning that bridges the understanding gap between what is understood and what is intended to be understood.
2. Feedback needs to be precise, concise, and linked to the learning objectives.
3. Feedback needs to offer recommendations and hints on how to do better.
4. Feedback should be clear and simple, appropriate for the learner's cognitive level.
5. Feedback needs to be provided promptly, for instance, upon the completion of a new assignment or, in the case of learners making slow progress, throughout the acquisition of new abilities and ideas. Delayed feedback could be a better option for more complex assignments requiring a lot of processing time.

Studies emphasize the importance of positive teacher language in fostering student engagement and language acquisition (Sun, 2021; Ni, 2012). Positive teacher feedback, including praise and care, can create a supportive learning environment that lowers students' affective filter, the emotional barrier that can hinder language learning (Krashen, 1982). This allows students to be more receptive to feedback and instruction. Therefore, incorporating positive language into feedback strategies is crucial for maximizing student learning.

Effective writing instruction in primary schools is crucial for fostering students' literacy development and communication skills (Sucipto, 2014). Additionally, research suggests that well-designed feedback can promote student learning and improve writing outcomes and development. However, providing such comprehensive and individualized feedback can be a significant challenge for educators, particularly when dealing with large class sizes and diverse student needs (Xu and Harfitt, 2018).

### **GAI and Writing Feedback**

Recent advancements in AI have paved the way for exploring the potential of AI tools in providing automated feedback on student writing. These tools can analyze student work based on predefined parameters or learn from human-annotated data to identify strengths and

weaknesses (Liu et. al., 2023). According to Liu et. al. (2023), AI-powered tools like Gemini can potentially:

1. Automate initial feedback: AI can analyze student writing and provide initial feedback on aspects like grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary usage, freeing up educators' time for more personalized guidance.
2. Offer personalised insights: AI tools can be trained on vast datasets of student writing, allowing them to provide feedback tailored to individual student needs and writing styles.
3. Scale-up feedback provision: AI can efficiently analyze large volumes of student writing, potentially addressing the challenges of providing timely feedback in large classrooms.

While AI offers promise in terms of efficiency and scalability, limitations exist. Current AI models might struggle to capture the full nuances of human language, potentially overlooking aspects like emotional depth, stylistic ingenuity, or cultural context (Oritsegbemi, 2023). Additionally, ethical considerations regarding potential biases within AI models and student data privacy must be carefully addressed (Slimi and Carballido, 2023). AI writing tools can unintentionally perpetuate biases, impacting marginalised students through language and cultural bias, and unfair assessment practices. Fluency in standard registers and varieties of English is often assumed, disadvantaging multilingual students or those with distinct dialects (Herold, 2022). GAI used for evaluating student work may reinforce these biases, leading to achievement gaps for underrepresented students (Mhlanga, 2023). Over time, such biases can become entrenched, further exacerbating inequalities in education (Selwyn, 2019).

In second language (L2) writing classrooms, the introduction of GAI-assisted tools has also led to a sea change in the conceptualisation and practice of automated written corrective feedback (AWCF) in L2 pedagogy. In a mixed-method multiple case study with four L2 writers, Yan & Zhang (2024) found that behavioural engagement with ChatGPT as a provider of AWCF was influenced by individual differences in language proficiencies and technological competencies. Participants in the study struggled to effectively regulate the learning process metacognitively. While the tool created an affectively engaging environment, it was also competence-demanding and time-consuming for learners.

AI in education can lessen the workload of teachers, enhance marking uniformity, offer widely customized learning, and guarantee more consistency in the instruction offered by schools and other educational institutions (Fischer, 2023). Thus, there may be cases of both augmented marking (where people and machines mark humans together) and automated marking (where robots mark humans).

### **Research on Model Essays in Language Learning**

Studies have shown that analyzing model essays can improve students' understanding of writing expectations, vocabulary usage, and sentence structure (Abe, 2008). This aligns with the Singaporean curriculum, which emphasizes specific content and language features in primary school writing (CPDD, 2020). It's common for parents in Singapore to purchase composition books for their kids so they can practice replicating sample compositions to become more proficient in writing (Gupta, 1995). In order to finish their writing tasks or to review their writing techniques before tests, a lot of elementary school students study model compositions. Additionally, they receive a list of vocabulary words to learn and include in their writings.

According to Abe (2008), model essays can serve as:

1. Points of reference: Students can analyze the structure, language use, and content organization within model essays to gain insights into effective writing strategies
2. Self-assessment tools: By comparing their own writing to model essays, students can identify areas for improvement and develop their critical evaluation skills.

## **Methodology**

This study explores the potential of utilizing narrative writing models, predetermined rubrics and AI feedback to enhance primary school students' writing skills. The methodology focuses on the analysis of pre-existing model essays and subsequent AI-driven feedback to identify potential benefits for classroom practice.

## **Data Collection**

### **Selecting Model Essays**

The study employed a convenience sampling approach, selecting readily available resources for analysis. Model essays were specifically chosen from four assessment books catering to primary school students. These assessment books typically showcase examples and guides for various writing prompts. The assessment books chosen were readily available and found in common bookstore chains in Singapore. Additionally, they were chosen as at least two of the books contained similar themes and topics of model essays.

The rationale behind selecting model essays stems from their potential to act as feedback tools. Model essays, often written by native or near-native speakers, can offer valuable insights regarding effective structure, engaging vocabulary choices, and compelling content. The choice to analyse model essays shifts the focus of feedback from simply correcting grammatical errors (lower-order skills) to a deeper analysis of content, language use, and structure (higher-order skills). The various language and phrasing errors typical in many student essays will also potentially affect GAI's ability to clearly understand plot details and structure, and provide good feedback. Another practical reason for selecting model essays over student-written ones is the fact that there is difficulty in collecting high-quality student-written essays from schools in Singapore, due to access reasons.

The use of model essays presents a practical implication for classroom practice. Students can initially refer to the model essays, then receive AI-generated feedback tailored to their own writing. This combined approach can raise awareness of essential aspects to consider during the writing process, encouraging students to focus on more than just grammar and sentence structure.

### **Selecting Prompts and Analyzing Models**

Five common writing themes were chosen for analysis: A Prank, Celebrations (Chinese New Year), The Bully, A Jovial Person, and Littering. This selection reflects themes that are regularly used in primary school assessments and writing exercises.

For each prompt, two distinct model essays were sourced from different assessment books (see Appendix A). This approach aimed to capture the diversity of writing styles and approaches within the chosen themes. This would also allow for the identification of common elements or

patterns between the two model essays to see if AI feedback would provide common feedback despite the content being different.

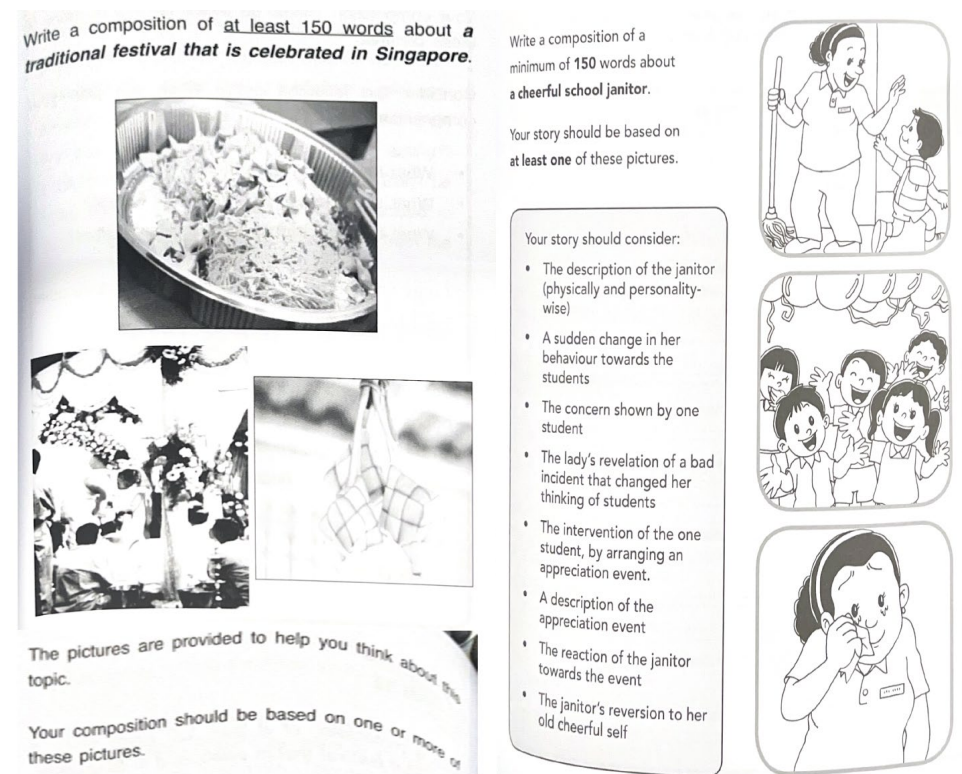
Of note is that two of the essays selected, “Littering” and “A Jovial Person” do not follow the typical narrative structure — the essays have no clear beginning, middle and end. Instead, the two compositions seem to be focused on a specific character’s thoughts, experiences and feelings about the given topic. These essays were chosen to see if Gemini would focus on giving feedback related to narrative story structure.

### AI Tool Selection and Rationale

Gemini version 1.0 (previously known as Google Bard) was chosen as the primary tool for AI feedback generation. This choice stemmed from the limitations of the free version of ChatGPT (GPT-3.5) in not being able to accept image prompts. While ChatGPT offers paid subscription plans with image prompting capabilities, the free version of Gemini allows for the integration of images alongside written prompts.

In Singapore, primary school continuous writing tasks typically provide students with three images to aid them in their writing. The instructions for the continuous writing task typically require students to use at least one of the three images provided in their writing. The images given can be symbolic (i.e., an image of a Chinese New Year decoration), though they typically show characters in certain situations (i.e., characters celebrating something). Two examples of the instructions given to students for the writing task can be seen in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2. Examples of Continuous Writing Instruction (Sources: Casco Publications, 2014, pp. 149-151 and Raffles Publications, n.d., pp. 182-184)**



With the affordance of being able to upload images to Gemini, it is assumed that the image prompts may further enhance the context and understanding of the writing prompts for the AI model, leading to more relevant and targeted feedback.

While this study utilizes Gemini for its specific functions, the broader concept of utilizing AI-powered feedback alongside model essays remains applicable across various platforms and tools. That is to say, the study should be replicable on other AI systems based on large language models, such as GPT-4 and Llama.

### **Utilizing a Pre-existing Rubric for Scoring**

The study employed a pre-existing rubric that was taken from a school in Singapore (See Figure 3), commonly used in primary school settings, to establish a framework for assessing the language and content of student essays. The chosen rubric was cross-checked with official syllabus documents and those from other schools to ensure both consistency and authenticity. The rubric encompasses key criteria such as grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, organization, and clarity of ideas, aligned with typical benchmarks for primary school writing assessment.

**Figure 3. Rubric for Composition Writing**

**Language Marking Scheme for Primary 5 and 6**

Mark range	1- 5	6 - 10	11 - 14	15 -17	18 -20
	Evident lack of organisation of events, numerous grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors, and poor vocabulary usage.	Multiple errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling, Wrong and limited use of vocabulary, mediocre organisation and sequencing of events.	A number of errors in punctuation and spelling; Average range of vocabulary, wrong usage of words, average organisation and sequencing of events.	Only a few errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling; Impressive vocabulary usage and clear organisation and sequencing of events.	Very few minor errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling; Excellent range of vocabulary; Exceptional organisation and sequencing of events.

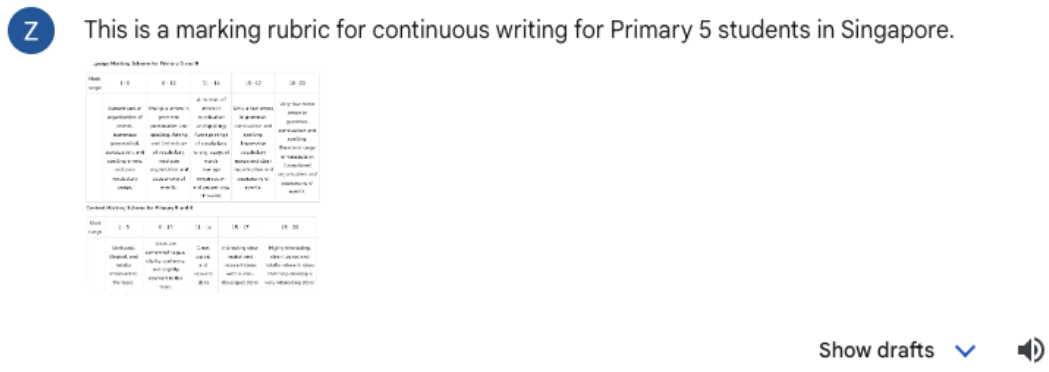
**Content Marking Scheme for Primary 5 and 6**

Mark range	1 - 5	6 - 10	11 - 14	15 - 17	18 - 20
	Confused, illogical, and totally irrelevant to the topic.	Ideas are somewhat vague, slightly confusing, and slightly relevant to the topic.	Clear, logical, and relevant ideas.	Interesting clear, logical and relevant ideas with a well-developed story.	Highly interesting, clear, logical and totally relevant ideas that help develop a very interesting story.

**Steps for Generating AI Feedback**

In order to collect feedback, the first step was to upload the rubric with the prompt, “This is a marking rubric for continuous writing for Primary 5 students in Singapore” (See Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Input into Gemini and Response about Rubric**



The image you sent is indeed a marking rubric for continuous writing for Primary 5 and 6 students in Singapore. It outlines the expectations for both content and language use, and assigns marks accordingly.

**Content**

- **1-5 marks:** Ideas are confused, illogical, and irrelevant to the topic.
- **6-10 marks:** Ideas are somewhat vague, slightly confusing, and slightly relevant to the topic.
- **11-14 marks:** Ideas are clear, logical, and relevant.
- **15-17 marks:** Ideas are interesting, clear, logical, and relevant, with a well-developed story.
- **18-20 marks:** Ideas are highly interesting, clear, logical, and totally relevant, that help develop a very interesting story.

**Language**

- **1-5 marks:** Evident lack of organisation of events, numerous grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors, and poor vocabulary usage.
- **6-10 marks:** Multiple errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling, wrong usage of words, average range of vocabulary, mediocre organisation and sequencing of events.
- **11-14 marks:** Only a few errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling, impressive vocabulary usage and clear organisation and sequencing of events.
- **15-17 marks:** Very few minor errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling, average range of vocabulary, excellent organisation and sequencing of events.
- **18-20 marks:** No errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling, exceptional range of vocabulary, exceptional organisation and sequencing of events.

This marking rubric can be a helpful tool for both teachers and students to understand the expectations for continuous writing in Primary 5 and 6 in Singapore. It can help students to focus on developing their ideas, using a variety of vocabulary and grammar correctly, and organizing their writing in a clear and logical way.

Next, the essays are uploaded individually. The relevant images associated with the writing prompt were uploaded to Gemini. Each composition was uploaded as a new conversation so



that the system would not be influenced/trained by the user's previous inputs. According to Team Gemini (2023), while Gemini cannot directly learn from prior interactions, it can leverage context and its internal memory to tailor its responses to the specific composition. This new conversation format helps mitigate the influence of past interactions, allowing us to see if Gemini can offer effective feedback without user-specific training.

Using the uploaded rubric and images, Gemini was instructed to perform two specific tasks (See Figure 5). Firstly, it would analyze the provided essay's language and content based on the criteria outlined in the uploaded rubric. This analysis aimed to generate specific scores (not ranges) for each rubric category. Secondly, Gemini was asked to offer detailed feedback on the essay's language and content, addressing areas of strength and areas for improvement.

### **Figure 5. Example of Prompt Input into Gemini**

Using the above marking rubric for both language and content, refer to these pictures and the writing prompt, "Littering"

1. Mark/score the language and content of the essay with specific marks (not a range) and a reason for the score
2. Give specific and detailed feedback on the following essay to make it better:

While providing useful initial feedback (See Figure 6), Gemini's analysis required further prompting to elicit deeper insights.

### **Figure 6. Example of feedback output by Gemini**

## ✦ Scoring and Feedback on Essay: "Littering"

**Language Score:** 18/20

- **Strengths:**

- Clear and concise sentences with proper grammar and punctuation.
- Varied vocabulary demonstrating good word choice.
- Descriptive use of language to paint a vivid picture of the scene (e.g., "scorching sun shone its rays", "dampened gnarly fingers").
- Use of transition words and phrases to connect ideas smoothly.

- **Areas for improvement:**

- Minor instance of word choice: "reeling back in shock" is slightly redundant as "stunned" already conveys the effect.

**Content Score:** 18/20

- **Strengths:**

- Addresses the prompt "Littering" by showcasing the negative consequences of littering through the incident.
- Presents a clear cause-and-effect relationship between the littering and the potential harm it could have caused.
- Highlights the positive aspects of helpfulness and community through Gopal's actions and the police response.
- Offers a clear and concise conclusion that reinforces the message of safety and responsibility.

- **Areas for improvement:**

- The essay primarily focuses on the specific incident and the resolution. While impactful, a broader discussion about the general effects of littering on the environment and society could further strengthen the content.

**Overall Feedback:**

This essay demonstrates strong writing skills with clear language, vivid descriptions, and a well-structured narrative. It effectively addresses the prompt by showcasing the dangers of littering and the importance of community responsibility. For further improvement, consider incorporating a broader discussion on the general impacts of littering beyond the specific incident. This will add depth to the content and create a more comprehensive response to the prompt.

Additional specific questions were asked, such as: "What specific steps could the student take to achieve a full score for language?" (See Figure 7) and "What specific steps could the student

take to achieve a full score for content?" (See Figure 8). This encouraged Gemini to provide actionable suggestions as well as a section of a model essay.

**Figure 7. Gemini Output after Further Prompting with the Question,**

**“What specific steps could the student take to achieve a full score for language?”**

✦ While the essay has strong language overall, achieving a perfect score in this section requires meticulous attention to detail and maximizing creative expression. Here are some specific steps the student could take to aim for a full score in language:

**1. Enhance Figurative Language:**

- While the essay uses descriptive language effectively (e.g., "scorching sun shone its rays"), consider incorporating additional figures of speech like metaphors, similes, or personification to add depth and imagery. For example, instead of "scorching sun," the writer could say "the sun beat down mercilessly, like a hammer on an anvil."
- Use sensory details beyond sight. Can you describe the sounds of the city, the smell of the air after the flower pot fell, or the texture of Mrs. Becca's bag? Engaging multiple senses can create a more immersive reading experience.

**2. Refine Sentence Structure:**

- While the sentences are grammatically correct, consider incorporating a variety of sentence structures to avoid monotony. This could involve using a mix of short and long sentences, introducing complex sentence structures with dependent clauses, or varying the sentence beginnings.
- Employ transitional words and phrases strategically to create smooth transitions between ideas and enhance the flow of the narrative.

**3. Explore Vocabulary:**

- Though the vocabulary is varied, consider using even more precise and evocative words to elevate the language further. Instead of "grateful," perhaps "overjoyed" or "heartfelt" could better capture Mrs. Becca's emotions. This requires thesauruses and careful selection of words that fit the context and tone.

**4. Proofread and Edit:**

- While the essay seems grammatically sound, meticulously proofread for any typos, punctuation errors, or minor inconsistencies in word choice. This final polish ensures the language is clear, concise, and error-free.

Remember, achieving a perfect score requires exceptional execution and often comes after multiple revisions. By incorporating these steps and focusing on refining the language, the student can significantly elevate the essay's literary quality and strive for a full score in the language category.

**Figure 8. Gemini Output after Further Prompting with the Question,**

**“What specific steps could the student take to achieve a full score for content?”**

◆ While the essay already achieved a high score in content, here are some specific steps the student could take to aim for a perfect score:

**1. Deepen the exploration of the characters:**

- **Gopal:** Go beyond depicting Gopal's helpfulness. Briefly describe his initial reaction to seeing Mrs. Becca struggle, his thoughts and emotions during the incident, and his sense of accomplishment after the situation is resolved.
- **Mrs. Becca:** Briefly touch upon her feelings of vulnerability and fear during the incident. Perhaps mention her thoughts about the culprit or her appreciation for Gopal's assistance.

**2. Expand on the resolution:**

- Briefly mention the potential consequences faced by the teenager who threw the flower pot. This could be a court appearance, a community service requirement, or even counseling sessions, depending on the specific context. This adds closure and reinforces the notion of accountability for irresponsible actions.

**3. Emphasize the social aspects of littering:**

- Briefly discuss the negative impact of littering on the community as a whole. This could involve mentioning the financial burden of cleaning up litter, the potential for property damage, or the negative aesthetic impact on the neighborhood.

**Here's an example of how the student could incorporate these suggestions:**

"...Thankfully, the man behind the killer litter was successfully dealt with. Gopal and Mrs. Becca had never felt so relieved. Since that incident, the two of them would always walk along the sheltered walkways leading to their block. After all, it is better to be safe than sorry.

The incident left a profound impact on Gopal. Initially hesitant, his quick thinking and act of kindness averted a potential tragedy. Witnessing the consequences of littering firsthand, he developed a deeper understanding of the importance of individual responsibility. Mrs. Becca, initially shaken by the experience, felt a surge of gratitude towards Gopal and a renewed sense of safety within her community. The teenager, facing the consequences of his actions, hopefully embarked on a journey of self-reflection and learned a valuable lesson about responsibility and the impact of his choices.

Littering not only poses a physical threat to individuals but also carries a significant burden for the community. The cost of cleaning up discarded waste diverts resources from other crucial areas, while the presence of litter can damage property and create an uninviting environment for residents."

By incorporating these suggestions, the student can portray the human element and social impact of the incident more deeply, leading to a well-rounded and comprehensive exploration of the littering issue, potentially achieving a perfect score in content.

These steps were done for all the sample model essays (See Appendix B). Following that, all the generated feedback data was compared and a thematic analysis was conducted to pinpoint

similarities and differences across the feedback generated by Gemini for all the model essays of different themes (See Appendix C).

## Findings and Discussion

An analysis of the data revealed recurring patterns across several aspects, though there were a few key differences.

### Similarities and Differences Across Gemini's Output

One of the key similarities is that Gemini tends to give compositions the mark range of 16-18 for each section — this was seen for eight out of ten of the compositions. The other two compositions were given lower marks likely due to their lack of narrative structure or depth as seen in the feedback given. This was in itself quite interesting, given that the sampled essays were meant to be model essays and should not have such flaws.

There may be several reasons for Gemini's tendency to give the same range of marks. One reason is that, unlike automated writing systems that are trained with human-marked essays, Gemini does not have previous input to act as a model for marking thus it may not consistently have an idea of what a good essay might look like across different themes and topics. This might also reflect an intrinsic limitation of Gemini in evaluating nuanced writing. Additionally, Gemini accesses its information from a variety of sources like user contributions and publicly available web pages (Team Gemini, 2023), which might affect scoring due to biases that are unknown to the user (Slimi and Carballido, 2023). It could also be possible that Gemini is mimicking human marking behaviour – teachers are often quite conservative and reluctant to give a piece of writing perfect or near-perfect grades, in practice.

Looking at the feedback, there were patterns identified; most of which are in line with what Liu et. al. (2023) suggested that AI could generate feedback for — grammar, mechanics, and vocabulary usage. Table 1 below summarizes the main similarities across the feedback.

**Table 1: Similarities across feedback from Gemini for both language and content areas**

Language	Content
Show, don't tell	Deepen characters
Improve sentence structure	Deepen settings
Improve vocabulary and descriptions	Enhance ending/conclusion/resolution
Use literary devices (figurative language)	Explore the topic/theme more
Refine grammar (i.e., punctuation. phrases)	Avoid overgeneralization
Proofread/edit/revise	Improve essay structure/organization

We note that Gemini did not focus much on form across all the given feedback. This was expected, and also one of the reasons why we chose to sample model essays, which are generally grammatically sound, save for some instances of incorrect or missing punctuation and the wrong use of tense in some of the essays (Abe, 2008). If the feedback had focused on form and language errors instead, it might have led to a loss in clarity (on the students' part) in what good performance in essay-writing constituted – is it just to produce a grammatically sound piece of writing, or to develop a coherent and engaging story with clear structure. Gemini's feedback, instead, focused more on content and stylistic elements, despite claims in the literature that GAI was posited to struggle with issues like style and emotional depth (Oritsegbemi, 2023). In this sense, AI-generated feedback seems to adhere to Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) principles of effective feedback, by clarifying what good performance is.

The feedback did at times focus on story structure, where specific feedback for each story section (introduction, body paragraphs, conclusion) was given, though the main focus seemed to be how to develop the content of the conclusion. Gemini's criteria for full marks for each section (content and language) were similar almost across all the compositions. This suggests that Gemini's idea and concept of an essay that is fully scored requires a lot more details than what was given within the various compositions, pointing to potential unrealistic expectations or biases in its evaluation.

A lot of the feedback centered on improving on the details: improve vocabulary and descriptions, use of literary devices, show don't tell, explore the topic/theme more, deepen characters and settings. Looking deeper into the specific feedback generated by Gemini, it was found that Gemini tended to give similar feedback with the same phrasing across different compositions. For example, in specific feedback for six out of ten of the essays, Gemini had suggested "show, don't tell". "Show, don't tell" is a common refrain in the Singapore writing classroom. It encourages students to actively engage with the text, builds their awareness of detail, and allows them to reflect on their work. A comparison can be seen in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Comparison of "Show, don't tell" feedback given by Gemini**

	Composition title	Feedback header	Feedback (excerpts)
1	A Prank and Wake-Up Call	Show, don't tell	Instead of stating emotions directly (e.g., "Susan's ears grew red at the sight of such a humiliating thing."), use descriptive language to show the reader how Susan feels. For example, "Heat surged through Susan's face, matching the fiery red sign now hanging from her neck."
2	Traditional Festival that is Celebrated in Singapore	Show, don't tell	Instead of saying "I felt immense guilt," use descriptive actions and dialogue to show the reader the character's emotions.
3	Blackmail Blues	Show, don't tell	Help the student understand the concept of "showing" instead of "telling" their emotions and

			actions. This involves using vivid descriptions of characters, settings, and actions to allow the reader to infer the emotions and thoughts involved.
4	The Bully	Show, don't tell	Instead of directly stating emotions, use descriptive language and actions to show the characters' feelings. For example, instead of "I was terrified," describe the physical manifestations of fear like "My heart hammered against my ribs, and cold sweat prickled my skin."
5	The Jovial Janitor	Show, don't tell	Instead of directly stating emotions like "sadness" or "gratitude," use descriptive language that allows the reader to infer the characters' feelings through actions, expressions, and dialogue.
6	A Jovial Person	Show, don't tell	Instead of stating "Everyone loves being with him because of his positive outlook," show how his positive outlook impacts others through specific examples. Describe a situation where John's optimism helped someone overcome a challenge or uplifted their mood. This will make the writing more engaging and impactful.

From the feedback excerpts, it is clear that Gemini has a default or preferred feedback structure, namely, stating the change that should be made - "Show, don't tell" - followed by explaining its feedback using typically the same sentence stems - "Instead of...", "use descriptive language/action".

While the overall structure of Gemini's feedback might follow a similar format across different essays, its analysis goes beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. Gemini dives deeper, generating feedback that's specific to each piece. The ability for AI to provide personalized insight was explored by Liu et. al. (2023). Gemini can reference specific examples within the composition to support its points. This demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the individual student's work, rather than simply offering generic comments. This ability holds significant value for educators. Since Gemini personalizes its feedback to each student's work, it can act as a springboard for further analysis. Teachers can leverage this AI-generated output as a starting point. By utilizing the strengths and weaknesses identified by Gemini, educators can craft more specific and personalized responses for each student. This streamlines the initial assessment process, allowing teachers to focus on providing deeper and more impactful feedback. The ability to collate patterns in the feedback is also useful for teachers in a large classroom setting. As suggested by Fisher (2023), augmented marking takes place when educators use Gemini as a tool to expand on its analysis, enhancing the depth and quality of feedback provided to each student. This aligns AI-generated feedback with another one of Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) principles of effective feedback, which is the ability to provide information to teachers that can be used for teaching.

One key difference found across all the feedback is also seen in the above example. Despite using the same prompt for all ten essays, there were differences in the way Gemini generated and structured feedback. There are instances where Gemini provides only indirect feedback. For example, in the case of the excerpt "The Bully," it might not always provide suggestions on how to "show, not tell" through specific sentence revisions. In such scenarios, educators might need to provide additional prompts to elicit more direct and granular feedback from Gemini. This could involve asking specific questions about areas like "show, don't tell" and prompting for illustrative examples. It's also important to acknowledge that Gemini's output can exhibit slight variations even with identical prompts. This variability stems from the inherent nature of large language models (Team Gemini, 2023). Educators should be aware of this and employ their expertise to evaluate and leverage the most relevant feedback generated by Gemini. By understanding these nuances, educators can effectively integrate Gemini's capabilities into their practice, maximizing its potential to enhance the feedback experience. A major implication for the implementation of AI in the classroom would thus be that teachers' AI literacy and the attendant training is indeed necessary for them to keep up with the dynamic changes brought by technology, as educators must understand how to follow up with specific prompts that will generate information they seek.

Another key similarity is the lack of personal pronouns and a lack of highlighting of strengths in the feedback generated by Gemini. It is posited that the personal pronouns "you" and "we" are used to personalize communication (Suryaningsih, 2021). While this may not be an important detail, Gemini's feedback does not sound personal and seems to increase social distance due to its lack of use of personal pronouns in feedback (Suryaningsih, 2021). Additionally, there is a lack of focus on the strengths of each composition. This is a classroom implication that teachers may want to note as positive teacher language is categorized as a dynamic element in nurturing learners' educational success (Sun, 2021). The use of positive teacher language during feedback may allow for the lowering of students' affective filter which in turn can allow for students to intake more comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982; Ni, 2012). The implication of this is that educators either have to prompt Gemini to reword its feedback in a positive tone or that they have to still take time to personalize and customize feedback to include positive teacher language to manage students' affective filters. In this respect, AI-generated feedback does not seem to fulfil one of Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) principles of effective feedback, which is to encourage positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.

Across all feedback output, Gemini also seems to focus on the structure of the compositions, namely the conclusions of the essays, with feedback that suggests that the resolutions should be expanded on. In Table 3 below, some examples of suggestions to strengthen the conclusion can be seen.

**Table 3: Gemini's feedback on strengthening the conclusion**

	Composition title	Feedback header	Feedback (excerpts)
1	Killer Litter	Expand on the resolution	Briefly mention the potential consequences faced by the teenager who threw the flower pot. This could be a court appearance, a community service requirement, or even counselling sessions, depending on the specific context. This adds closure



			and reinforces the notion of accountability for irresponsible actions.
2	A Prank and Wake-Up Call	Strengthen the conclusion	While the ending offers a good summary of the repercussions, consider adding a final thought or reflection to leave a lasting impression. Did this incident change the dynamic between Susan and Mr. Ravi? Did Susan develop better habits for completing her homework? Offer a glimpse into the potential lasting impact of this event.
3	A Naughty Prank	Strengthening the Ending's Impact	As suggested previously, the ending offers closure but lacks a deeper emotional connection. Consider revising the ending to create a lasting impression on the reader.  You could show Sam reflecting on his actions and vowing to make amends, or even have him face a minor consequence beyond just paying Nicky.
4	Traditional Festival That is Celebrated in Singapore	Reflecting on the experience	Briefly mention how this experience impacted your understanding of the festival or your relationship with your family.  Briefly mention how this experience impacted your understanding of the festival's traditions and their meaning. Did it deepen your appreciation for the cultural significance?  Reflect on how this experience, despite the initial mishap, might have strengthened your relationship with your family. Did it teach you anything about communication, forgiveness, or family dynamics?
5	Chaotic Chinese New Year	Enhance the Resolution	Expand on the emotional impact: Show the characters' emotions instead of just stating them. Describe Aunt Susan's guilt through her trembling hands and tearful eyes. Show the family's concern for Grandma through their worried expressions and hushed voices.  Develop the internal conflict: Explore the internal conflict within Aunt Susan. Did she genuinely believe comparing the children was best for them? Does she grapple with shame or regret for her actions?

			Show, not tell: Instead of saying "settling of differences," showcase the reconciliation through actions and dialogue. Does Aunt Susan offer a sincere apology and hug her sister? Do the cousins share a playful moment, signifying a renewed bond?
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Gemini seems to put a lot of emphasis on the author's voice as much of the feedback is asking the author to include a reflection on what happened in the story (e.g. "Reflect on how this experience...", "Briefly mention how this experience impacted your understanding of") or for the author to include some sort of moral of the story that can be learnt from their composition. There is also a lot of emphasis on how to create a "lasting impact/impression" on readers. This finding is interesting as it seems that Gemini is prompting students to include more emotions in their stories — contrary to claims that AI typically does not focus on emotional depth (Oritsegbemi, 2023). This can be seen as evidence of AI-generated feedback delivering high quality information to students about their learning, another one of Nicol & Mcfarlane-Dick's (2006) principles of effective feedback. They contend that where feedback is given, it is important that is related to specific and relevant goals, standard or criteria – which seems to be the case here.

Following the rubric that it was fed, Gemini gave the compositions "Littering" and "A Jovial Person" lower scores compared to the rest of the compositions — 25 marks and 27 marks respectively. This suggests that Gemini can closely adhere to the marking rubric that was fed to it. This is in line with findings from Liu et. al. (2023) that GAI tools can analyze student work based on pre-defined parameters and provide personalized feedback.

The feedback generated by Gemini does aid in quickly identifying action points that can help students bridge the gap between their current and desired performance, which is another one of Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) principles of effective feedback. There are specific actions such as "deepen character development", "adding sensory details" and "utilize figurative language" that Gemini generates along with guiding questions and examples. One example can be seen in the Killer Litter story where guiding questions are included in the feedback: "Can you describe the sounds of the city, the smell of the air after the flower pot fell, or the texture of Mrs. Becca's bag?" The use of questions is also encouraged in the STP (2024) to scaffold students' thinking instead of providing answers straight away. Sometimes, Gemini generates an example that students can use, as seen in feedback for Chaotic Chinese New Year, "Instead of just mentioning mess, describe the specific sights and sounds of the situation ("Scattered vegetables and fish lay in a colourful disarray, emitting a faint fishy aroma")."

However, there remains a few criteria of effective feedback in Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick's framework that AI-generated feedback does not naturally meet, such as encouraging teacher and peer dialogue around learning, and to a lesser extent, facilitating the development of self-assessment in learning. That the given feedback would foster further dialogue around learning between teachers and also peers is something that takes place beyond the GAI-assisted evaluation and feedback process, although it is possible that AI-generated feedback can feed that dialogic process. Additionally, although Gemini's feedback did not seem to overtly facilitate the development of self-assessment in learning, it is conceivable that specific prompt engineering beyond what we have tried in the current study can make it possible.

In closing, this study addressed two key research questions. The first is if Gemini could provide effective feedback on continuous writing tasks for primary school students in Singapore. This question was explored by analyzing Gemini's feedback on student essays. The findings

revealed that Gemini offers promise in several areas. It can deliver clear, age-appropriate feedback aligned with marking rubrics. It identifies weaknesses, suggests corrections, and proposes specific action points for improvement. This feedback helps educators pinpoint areas where students need to improve, ultimately informing their teaching strategies. However, limitations were also identified. While Gemini can generate examples of good writing, prompting might be necessary for specific instances. The sheer volume of suggestions might overwhelm students, requiring teachers to prioritize areas for improvement. Additionally, Gemini's feedback may lack focus on student strengths and personalization, and it might struggle with essays that deviate from traditional narratives.

The second research question addressed was the potential implications of GAI-generated feedback on the teaching and learning process in Singaporean primary school composition writing. Gemini offers valuable potential for educators who play a vital role in interpreting and tailoring Gemini's output to individual student needs. Gemini can streamline the initial assessment process by giving feedback that acts as a springboard for further feedback, allowing teachers to focus on providing deeper and more personalized feedback. While AI can identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement, teachers must tailor this feedback and address emotional factors that AI can't. Additionally, while Gemini can identify areas for improvement in narrative structure, its focus seems to be on conclusions. Thus, teachers may need to provide more guidance on the overall story structure, including elements like the inciting incident, climax, and pacing. To get the most out of AI feedback, educators will require training on using prompts effectively.

### **Limitations of Study and Future Directions**

It is important to acknowledge that this study primarily focuses on methodology and potential applications. Further research is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach in actual classroom settings and to assess the impact on students' writing abilities. We agree with a reviewer's suggestion that future work could sample student-written essays, as well as get human (teachers) raters to evaluate the essays. Then, the AI-generated feedback can be compared against feedback provided by human raters. This comparison could offer valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, ultimately informing the development of more effective feedback strategies for primary school students' writing development.

Furthermore, future studies could explore refining the selection criteria for model essays and delve deeper into the types of AI feedback most beneficial for young learners. Additionally, investigating the integration of this method within existing curriculum frameworks and assessing teacher perspectives on its implementation would provide valuable insights for educational practice.

While the chosen five prompts offer a good starting point, future studies could consider expanding the scope to include additional writing genres and prompts. This could involve engineering prompts for specific curricular themes, character development, or creative writing exercises.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the integration of GAI such as Gemini, into the realm of writing feedback holds promise and challenges alike. As technology continues to redefine the boundaries of pedagogy, this research has delved into the potential implications for teachers and the effectiveness of

Gemini in providing feedback for primary school composition writing in Singapore. The intersection of traditional teaching methodologies with innovative AI solutions opens new avenues for educators to enhance and improve the writing instruction process. However, it is crucial to critically analyze the findings and recognize the limitations and considerations for practical implementation in the classroom.

One key aspect that emerges from this study is the time-consuming nature of the process, especially regarding the manual input of handwritten compositions into digital form. As students often produce hardcopy work, educators must invest significant time and effort in the transition to a softcopy format suitable for Gemini analysis. This practical limitation raises questions about the feasibility of implementing GAI in real classroom settings, where time is often a precious resource. Despite this challenge, the potential benefits of using Gemini in providing targeted and constructive feedback cannot be overlooked. The system's ability to assess language and content based on predefined rubrics, offer personalized insights, and identify areas for improvement demonstrates its potential as a valuable tool for educators.

Addressing the research questions posed in this study sheds light on the effectiveness of Gemini in providing feedback for primary school composition writing in Singapore. The first research question explored the extent to which Gemini can offer effective feedback on continuous writing tasks for primary school students. The findings reveal both promise and areas for improvement. Gemini demonstrates a tendency to provide consistent mark ranges that are mid to high, 16-18 marks, for different compositions, indicating a need for further refinement in understanding diverse themes and topics. The feedback generated often focuses on content and stylistic elements, emphasizing the importance of details, vocabulary enhancement, and narrative structure. Despite these patterns, Gemini showcases a general structure in providing feedback, allowing educators to leverage its insights as a basis for further personalized feedback.

In terms of content, Gemini consistently recommends improvements in areas such as deepening character development, enhancing sensory details, and utilizing figurative language. This aligns with the expectations of effective writing instruction, highlighting the importance of narrative elements in creating engaging and impactful compositions. Additionally, Gemini emphasizes the significance of the author's voice and suggests incorporating reflections or moral lessons to leave a lasting impression on readers. These insights into narrative and story structure reflect the alignment between Gemini's feedback and the underlying rubrics, indicating its ability to assess compositions based on the criteria fed into the system.

The second research question investigates the potential implications of GAI-generated feedback on the teaching and learning process in Singaporean primary school composition writing. Gemini's feedback has the potential to inform teaching practices by quickly identifying areas of improvement across multiple essays. The system aids in recognizing action points that can help bridge the gap between students' current and desired performance. This aligns with effective feedback principles, emphasizing timely and actionable insights to facilitate meaningful learning. Gemini's ability to generate feedback aligned with marking rubrics and offer valuable data for instructional adaptation positions it as a tool that can enhance teaching practices.

However, the study also reveals considerations for teachers when implementing GAI-generated feedback in the classroom. Gemini tends to provide feedback without personal pronouns and lacks a focus on highlighting strengths in compositions. The impersonal nature of the feedback and the absence of positive teacher language raises concerns about the potential impact on students' motivation and engagement. Educators need to be mindful of incorporating positive

feedback and personalization to create a supportive learning environment. While the system provides valuable insights, it should be seen as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, teacher expertise and guidance.

This research contributes valuable insights into the potential of GAI, specifically Gemini, as a tool for enhancing feedback delivery in Singaporean primary school composition writing. The findings suggest that Gemini can offer constructive feedback aligned with predefined rubrics, emphasizing narrative elements, details, and vocabulary enhancement. However, practical considerations, such as the time-consuming input process and the need for teacher intervention to personalize feedback, highlight the complexities of integrating GAI into the classroom. As technology continues to evolve, further research and refinement are essential to harness the benefits of GAI while addressing practical challenges, ultimately creating a symbiotic relationship between technology and traditional pedagogy in the realm of writing instruction. The journey toward effective AI-driven writing feedback in primary schools requires continuous exploration, collaboration, and adaptation to create a meaningful impact on student learning outcomes.

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## Exploring ChatGPT's Capabilities in Creative Writing: Can GPT-4o Conduct Rhetorical Move Analysis in Narrative Short Stories?

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### Abstract

With the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, the application of AI in academic research and language education has become increasingly widespread. GPT-4o, a new flagship model that can reason across audio, vision, and text in real time, has been found to offer substantial improvements over its predecessors. However, its capability to analyse rhetorical moves in creative writing remains unclear. This study aims to investigate whether GPT-4o can identify the rhetorical moves in narrative short stories with a focus on language assessment themes, and check the accuracy of the results by human experts. Moreover, the essentiality and frequency of the moves in these stories are reported. Adopting Jiang et al.'s (2024) eight-move model for the annotation of narrative stories, the results indicated that while ChatGPT (GPT-4o) quickly identified rhetorical moves, its segmentation of sentence endpoints differed slightly from human coders, particularly in several moves. However, these differences did not affect the overall range, frequency, or sequence of the moves, suggesting that GPT-4o can still effectively identify moves in narrative short stories. Another finding showed that Moves 1 to 6 were obligatory in all 50 narrative short stories from *Tests & Us* (Volumes 2 & 3), while Moves 7 and 8 were conventional, with no optional moves identified. As for the occurrence frequency, these stories contain 478 moves, with Move 4, "Complicating the story" being the most frequent, appearing 80 times (16.7%). These findings offer insights into the potential of AI to support textual analysis in creative writing and encourage researchers to explore rhetorical moves in narratives.

*Keywords:* ChatGPT, move analysis, creative writing, narrative short stories, language assessment

### Introduction

Narrative short stories are a vital literary genre that recounts connected events or actions within a specific timeframe, often following a chronological and causally related structure (Yoon, 2021). Beyond storytelling, narratives are fundamental to language acquisition and literacy development, helping individuals articulate thoughts, construct self-identity, and build social relationships (Deane et al., 2019). Moreover, they can shed light on the competency of narrators' language and their pragmatic knowledge, and therefore, they can be of great importance for pedagogical and artistic purposes (Kang, 2005). In terms of narrative structure, the orientation, complication, evaluation, and resolution phases are present in it and there may be a coda as well (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). These stages guide the reader through the story, offering deeper understanding and engagement.

As artificial intelligence (AI) has matured, with an emphasis on natural language processing,



many researchers are interested in the potential of applying AI models to the examination of creative writing processes. Cognitive analysis involves the detection of patterns and structures in various domains using tools, where GPT-4o, which synthesizes not only text but also audio and video data based on advanced technologies, has been highly performed in text and structural analysis of scholarly and technical writings. However, analysis of narrative fiction, particularly short stories, is a more complex task, whose exploration is still in its fledgling stages. Specifically, whether GPT-4o can accurately identify rhetorical moves—key stages in a story’s development—has not been thoroughly examined. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill this gap by looking into whether GPT-4o can effectively perform rhetorical move analysis in narrative short stories.

Applying Jiang et al.’s (2024) eight-move model for annotation, this research will compare GPT-4o’s performance with that of human coders, focusing on accuracy in identifying move structures. The analysis will also assess the essentiality and frequency of these moves within 50 short stories from *Tests & Us* (Volumes 2 & 3). By examining GPT-4o’s capabilities in analysing creative writing, this research aims to contribute to the growing discourse on the role of AI in language education and literary analysis. Understanding whether AI can replicate the nuanced analytical skills of human experts in narrative writing will provide insights into its potential applications in both academic research and educational tools.

The findings highlight the potential of AI models in supporting complex forms of text analysis, particularly in reducing the time and expertise required for manual coding. However, despite this progress, there has been limited attention given to how the latest model, GPT-4o, performs in rhetorical move analysis, especially within creative narratives. This study aims to address this gap by examining GPT-4o’s performance in this area. Firstly, the study investigates the extent to which GPT-4o can identify and analyse rhetorical moves in narrative short stories with a focus on language assessment themes. Secondly, the study explores the essentiality rates and occurrence frequency of the moves in these short stories.

## Literature Review

Narrative short stories, a staple of literary fiction, captivate readers by weaving together plot, character, setting, and theme in compact and compelling ways. These stories often employ a variety of rhetorical techniques to engage, inform, and evoke emotions, creating a nuanced interplay between form and function. Whether they are exploring human emotions or depicting fantastical worlds, narrative short stories offer rich material for analysis, especially when it comes to identifying the communicative strategies authors use to convey meaning. One such method of analysis is rhetorical move analysis, which breaks down a text into schematic units or “moves”, each serving a distinct communicative function within the broader discourse. A move is seen as a chunk of text, encompassing at least one complete sentence with a specific communicative function, indicating that any sentence or group of sentences meeting the criteria of a move or step in the coding system was considered an instance of that move or step, irrespective of length (Zhang & Wannaruk, 2016; Geng et al., 2023). In the coding phase, moves or steps are counted as single instances if uninterrupted, but as separate instances if interrupted by different moves or steps (Geng et al., 2023). This type of analysis has traditionally been done manually, a time-consuming process that requires deep expertise in both linguistics and the genre being studied. Though manual move analysis is considered the gold standard, tools such as Mover, Research Writing Tutor, and Academic Writing Analytics (AWA) have emerged to assist researchers in identifying rhetorical structures more efficiently (Knight et al., 2020). These tools offer varying degrees of automation, but they still rely heavily on human input for accurate coding and interpretation.

Released on May 13, 2024, GPT-4o (“o” for “Omni”, derived from the Latin word “omnis”, meaning “all” or “every”) is the latest multimodal LLM (Large Language Model) from OpenAI. It provides significant enhancements on its predecessors with the addition of multimodal features, larger context windows, advanced tokenization, and higher processing speeds, and, the performance state of the arts in generation and comprehension over texts, audio, images, and video. It is also a step towards much more natural human-computer interaction (Islam & Moushi, 2024). It has the ability to respond to audio inputs in 232 milliseconds on the minimum and a little over 320 milliseconds on an average, which is rather efficient in conversation. It also delivers performance on par with GPT-4 Turbo in terms of processing text in English and code and demonstrates further breakthroughs in producing text in other languages, but it is vastly quicker and costs half as much in the API. The model’s efficiency in handling different types of data results in high success rates and reduced processing times and costs (OpenAI, 2024). Thus, Geng et al. (2024) considered if there is a possibility of employing AI to conduct other various types of textual analysis including discourse, sentiment, and stylistic analysis, as well as for linguistic analysis encompassing lexical, semantic, pragmatic, genre, frame, and intertextuality analysis.

Based on previous findings, scholars have already begun exploring GPT-4 and GPT-4o’s capabilities in automating elements of textual analysis. For example, Savelka et al. (2023) demonstrated that GPT-4 can analyse legal texts at a level comparable to trained law students. Similarly, Siiman (2023) found that GPT-4 could assist in qualitative data analysis when properly guided by structured prompts, aligning AI outputs closely with human interpretations. Geng & Nimehchisalem (2023) noticed that GPT-4 could conduct conceptual metaphors and thematic analysis of short stories. Lian (2024) investigated GPT-4o in fields such as medical education, where it outperformed previous models by achieving accuracy levels above the national pass mark in the 2023 Chinese Medical Licensing Examination. However, while these studies have demonstrated its potential in structured disciplines, its application to creative and narrative-based textual analysis remains largely unexplored.

## Methods

### Research Design

The current study used a mixed approach that integrated qualitative and quantitative methods to obtain the benefits from both approaches. The qualitative aspect involved human coders verifying the moves identified by the AI-assisted tool GPT-4o. Meanwhile, the quantitative aspect aimed to determine the essentiality rates and frequency of occurrence of rhetorical moves within the constructed corpus.

### Corpus Construction

In this study, 50 narrative short stories were selected from the books *Tests & Us – A Collection of Real Stories* (Volumes 2 and 3) (Nimehchisalem & Geng, 2023; Nimehchisalem & Geng, 2024), published by Generis Publishing. Volume 2 contains 22 stories, while Volume 3 contains 28 stories. These stories were chosen because they collectively provide a diverse and representative corpus, featuring narratives written by students, teachers, researchers, educators, and professional writers from different parts of the world. With various backgrounds originating from diverse countries and nurtured among different linguistic environments, these writers have not only brought their cultural perspectives but also given new insights on “assessment” to make it more thrilling for readers. To enable comprehensive examination by GPT-4o and language specialists, the accessible stories were collated into a single Word file. Table 1 presents the word counts of short stories in these two collections.

**Table 1: Word Counts of Short Stories in *Tests & Us* (Volumes 2 & 3)**

No.	Words	No.	Words	No.	Words	No.	Words	No.	Words
1	871	11	657	21	1345	31	775	41	934
2	1135	12	989	22	894	32	1134	42	625
3	1364	13	879	23	1314	33	1635	43	1205
4	1054	14	965	24	1309	34	1011	44	1284
5	979	15	710	25	1030	35	1856	45	1176
6	1011	16	837	26	1198	36	961	46	851
7	949	17	519	27	1112	37	1434	47	1407
8	1038	18	613	28	975	38	1116	48	1145
9	1052	19	822	29	806	39	2091	49	490
10	1263	20	1348	30	1100	40	773	50	1652
<b>Total Word Count: 53693</b>					<b>Average Word Count: 1074</b>				

It can be seen from the table that the total word count is around 53,693, with an average of 1,074 words per short story. The briefest narrative, titled “The Power of Hard Work”, consists of 490 words, whereas the lengthiest story, entitled “Bridging Worlds: The Odyssey of Hammurabi”, encompasses 2,091 words.

**Analytical Framework**

The current research analysed the use of rhetorical moves in 50 narrative short stories of language assessment by employing Jiang et al.’s (2024) pioneering eight-move model. This framework (as can be seen in Table 2) consisted of three stages, namely, Orientation, Incident, and Conclusion, which were further categorized into eight moves.

**Table 2: Jiang et al.’s (2024) Eight-Move Model for the Annotation of Narrative Stories**

Stages	Moves		Functions
Orientation	Move 1	Setting the scene	Introducing characters, time, location, and behavioural situation
	Move 2	Laying out the event	Presenting a temporal sequence of occurrences at the beginning of the text and giving an account of how one event leads to another
	Move 3	Giving the current situation	Describing the temporary condition in the story before turning to the complication of the plot
Incident	Move 4	Complicating the story	Unfolding temporally ordered actions that lead to one or more crises
	Move 5	Evaluating the status quo	Appraising complication by indicating attitudes, opinions, or the usuality of events, suspending or interwoven with action
	Move 6	Dealing with the	Performing further actions to resolve the crisis

		complication	
Conclusion	Move 7	Foregrounding the main idea	Stating the main idea of the story after the resolution, acting as a culminating event
	Move 8	Ending the story	Making a statement or comment about the story, or returning the narration to the present time

The first stage, Orientation, sets up the context and “presents an expectant activity sequence” for the narrative (Martin & Rose, 2008, p. 51). Three moves are involved in this stage. Move 1, Setting the scene, introduces the story’s characters, time, location, and behavioural situation. Move 2, Laying out the event, presents a temporal sequence of occurrences at the beginning of the text, explaining how one event leads to another while expounding on the context and acquainting readers with the story’s setting to promote plot development. Move 3, Giving the current situation, outlines the temporary state within the story before the plot complication arises. This move helps readers understand the overall atmosphere and mood, setting the stage for the following section.

The second stage, known as the Incident, introduces the central event of the story and marks a significant progression in the plot. Three moves are comprised in this stage. Move 4, Complicating the story, unfolds temporally ordered actions that break the normalcy established in the first stage and that lead to one or more conflicts in the story. Move 5, Evaluating the status quo, assesses the complication by expressing attitudes or opinions about it. This evaluation often “suspends the action, increasing the narrative tension, and intensifying the release when tension is resolved” (Martin & Rose, 2008, p. 52). Move 6, Dealing with the complication, addresses and resolves the crisis introduced in Move 4.

The third stage, the Conclusion, wraps up the narrative by summarizing its essence and guiding readers back to the ‘reality’ of the present. This stage includes two moves. Move 7, Foregrounding the main idea, highlights the central theme following the resolution, either implicitly through a climactic event or explicitly by emphasizing the story’s moral. Move 8, Ending the story, provides a final statement or reflection on the narrative, either returning to the present moment or offering a new context unrelated to the main event, thus bringing the story to a close.

### Data Analysis

In this study, an AI-assisted tool was employed for qualitative analysis of rhetorical moves within creative writing, specifically for narrative short stories. To address the first research question, a most recent cutting-edge version of ChatGPT (GPT-4o) was used to identify the moves in 50 narratives from *Tests & Us – A Collection of Real Stories* (Volumes 2 & 3). The interaction with GPT-4o commenced with the researchers initiating a “new chat” and inputting specific prompts and cues.

Firstly, Jiang et al.’s (2024) pioneering eight-move model for the annotation of narrative stories was inserted into the chat interface in detail, serving as the instruction set for the AI program. Subsequently, GPT-4o was tasked with performing the analysis based on the provided requirements. As observed by Geng et al. (2024), the accuracy of the results generated by ChatGPT was directly proportional to the precision and clarity of the instructions and questions. The AI system provided more accurate and dependable results when it received lucid and explicit directives. Hence, the researchers tried to add some instructions on how to code chunks of text and underline the typical parts that realize certain moves.

The prompt entered to GPT-4o was like:

- *The contents of Jiang et al.'s (2024) eight-move model.*
- *A rhetorical move is characterized as a chunk of text that contains at least one complete sentence and serves a specific communicative function. This means that whenever a sentence or combination of sentences fits the description of any move in the coding system, it is regarded to be an instance of a move regardless of its length.*
- *By adopting Jiang et al.'s (2024) eight-move model, could you please tag chunks of text as No. 1, 2, 3, mention the start and end point of each chunk, underline the typical parts that realize each move, add a short description, and create a table by thoroughly analysing all the moves in the following narrative short story, with special attention to recurring ones that contribute to the cyclical progression of the narrative? The columns of the table should be: Move No., Functions, Start & End Points, and Descriptions.*

By clicking “send message” to deliver the prompt, GPT-4o would answer by generating a table with the requested information. Due to the cyclical repetition feature of moves (Swales, 2004), the researcher delivered another prompt - *Does the analysis include all the recurring moves?* to make the results more accurate by avoiding the missing of any recurring moves.

After obtaining the results for the identification of moves in 50 narrative short stories, the potential errors that GPT-4o made in the analysis were examined by two human coders. If any discrepancies arose, the researcher conducted a deeper investigation to determine the underlying causes.

Finally, the essentiality and frequency of the moves in these stories were analysed manually. Essentiality is about the covering range of moves and refers to the percentage of texts that contain a certain move at least once (Lu et al., 2021) while frequency is about the number of moves and refers to the occurrence of a certain move in all the texts of a corpus. Regarding essentiality rates or inclusion rates, this study followed Rasmeenin's (2006) rationale by defining a move as obligatory if it appeared in 100% of the analysed corpus, conventional if it occurred in 66% to 99% of the corpus, and optional if it was present in less than 66%. As for occurrence frequency, this study used descriptive statistics and the auxiliary software SPSS to report the distribution (percentage) of each move. A point worthy of mention is that the cyclical repetition of a move within a section of text was addressed by treating each occurrence of the move as separate. For instance, if a text begins with Move 1, proceeds to Move 2, and then returns to Move 1, Move 1 would be counted twice (Biber et al., 2007).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **GPT-4o's Capacity of the Identification of Moves in Narrative Short Stories**

According to the findings, the researcher discovered that ChatGPT (GPT-4o) was able to quickly and accurately identify rhetorical moves. However, regarding the chunks of text segmented by GPT-4o, the sentence endpoints were coded differently by GPT-4o and human coders. This discrepancy can be observed in several moves, such as M2, M3, M4, M5, M6, and M7.

While the analysis includes 50 narrative short stories with a language assessment theme, Table 3 presents an example of GPT-4o's identification of moves within a story titled “Assessment in My Little Heaven, Primary One” written by Jayakaran Mukundan. The story recounts his childhood experiences as the eighth child in a large family, along with his struggles with dyslexia and health issues. Despite these challenges, his Standard One teacher, Ms. Ong Siok

Lay, who lacked formal university training but employed a caring teaching approach, helped him overcome these difficulties. Ms. Ong used songs, dramatization, and positive reinforcement to create an inclusive and encouraging classroom environment. Jayakaran’s traditional writing difficulties were mitigated by his strong artistic abilities; he was even praised for his creative drawings, despite often inverting letters. Ms. Ong’s patient and supportive approach made Jayakaran feel valued and capable. Unfortunately, her departure at the end of the year marked the end of this nurturing period, as subsequent teachers did not offer the same level of understanding or support. The story underscores the profound impact of compassionate teaching and highlights the importance of recognizing and nurturing each child’s unique abilities, demonstrating how tailored educational strategies can significantly enhance a student’s learning journey and self-esteem.

**Table 3: Example of GPT-4o’s Move Identification in Narrative Short Stories with Emphasis on Language Assessment Themes**

<b>Move No.</b>	<b>Functions</b>	<b>Start &amp; End Points</b>	<b>Descriptions</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Setting the scene</b>	“As a child, the eighth in a family of eleven...” to “...poorly developed lungs. I was also asthmatic.”	Introducing the protagonist, their family background, and early health issues.
<b>2</b>	<b>Laying out the event</b>	“I was an all-day thumb-sucker...” to “...kept quiet and just replaced the wet bed sheets.”	Describing the protagonist’s behaviour and struggles with anxiety and bed-wetting, setting the stage for his challenges.
<b>3</b>	<b>Giving the current situation</b>	“I was born a true-blue dyslexic...” to “...death (+) and all attention to the board and the teacher was lost as my imagination strayed from the class.”	Transitioning to the protagonist’s difficulties at school, highlighting his dyslexia and attention span issues.
<b>4</b>	<b>Complicating the story</b>	“Dyslexics starting school discover a lot about themselves...” to “...completely the reverse when you wrote it. My letters seemed shy (just like my personality) and some simply looked the other way.”	Elaborating on the protagonist’s struggles with learning, particularly in arithmetic class, and the impact of his dyslexia.
<b>5</b>	<b>Evaluating the status quo</b>	“My Standard One teacher, Ms. Ong Siok Lay...” to “...the combined voices of the majority seemed to have drowned the errors and solved the problems of those who did not sing the entire song.”	Discussing the protagonist’s early school experiences and the realization of his differences compared to other students, leading to feelings of hopelessness.
<b>6</b>	<b>Dealing with the</b>	“Ms. Ong’s assessment at the end	Introducing Ms. Ong, the

	<b>complication</b>	of the song...” to “...intuitively knew how learners develop language.”	protagonist’s teacher, and her methods of teaching and assessment that help the protagonist cope with his difficulties.
<b>4</b>	<b>Complicating the story</b>	“While the early morning English lessons...” to “...at the top and bottom of the page.”	Describing the challenges faced by the protagonist during writing lessons and his initial struggle with writing the letter B.
<b>6</b>	<b>Dealing with the complication</b>	“Ms. Ong then showed how the letter B was written on the blackboard...” to “...together drew the line and the two half circles to look like the B on the board.”	Illustrating Ms. Ong’s supportive approach in helping the protagonist learn to write the letter B correctly.
<b>4</b>	<b>Complicating the story</b>	“Ms. Ong then went around to look at the other students’ work...” to “...outer space in total darkness.”	Highlighting the protagonist’s continued struggle with writing the letter B and the resulting frustration.
<b>6</b>	<b>Dealing with the complication</b>	“Meanwhile Ms. Ong returned to my desk and I sheepishly looked at her...” to “...What a way to assess a dyslexic. There were two parts meant for assessment; the letters were not up to expectations but the patterns made up for it. I passed!”	Showing Ms. Ong’s positive reinforcement and her way of assessing the protagonist’s work by focusing on his strengths.
<b>7</b>	<b>Foregrounding the main idea</b>	“They say nothing good lasts forever...” to “...taught by teachers whom I felt had somehow escaped from Hell.”	Emphasizing the positive impact of Ms. Ong’s teaching methods on the protagonist’s learning experience and self-esteem.
<b>8</b>	<b>Ending the story</b>	“And from Primary Two onwards I was taught by teachers whom I felt had somehow escaped from Hell.”	Concluding with the departure of Ms. Ong and the protagonist’s return to facing less supportive teachers, indicating a return to his previous challenges.

From the analysis in Table 3, it is evident that all eight moves were detected by GPT-4o. The sequence of moves was identified as M1-M2-M3-M4-M5-M6-M4-M6-M4-M6-M7-M8. GPT-4o accurately labelled the move functions corresponding to their respective move numbers. Notably, M4 (Complicating the story) and M6 (Dealing with the complication) occurred three times each, reflecting their cyclical repetition within the narrative. In contrast, the other moves each appeared only once.

However, when comparing GPT-4o's coding results with those of human coders, discrepancies were found in the endpoint for M7 (Foregrounding the main idea) and the starting point for M8 (Ending the story). The last paragraph of the story reads:

“They say nothing good lasts forever. This was terribly true in my case. Ms. Ong got married and moved out of my school. And from Primary Two onwards I was taught by teachers whom I felt had somehow escaped from Hell.”

GPT-4o identified M7 from the beginning until the end of this paragraph and labelled M8 for the last sentence, overlapping with part of M7. However, human coders classified “They say nothing good lasts forever. This was terribly true in my case.” as M7, as it philosophically encapsulates and elevates the main idea. They classified “Ms. Ong got married and moved out of my school. And from Primary Two onwards I was taught by teachers whom I felt had somehow escaped from Hell.” as M8, because it comments on the story and returns to the author's experience from Primary Two onwards with a sense of pessimism. The use of critical language in this final section achieved a contrast effect.

These differences likely stem from several underlying reasons. First, linguistic complexity and ambiguity play a significant role. In moves like “Foregrounding the main idea” (M7) and “Ending the story” (M8), the overlap in segmentation suggests that GPT-4o may struggle to distinguish nuanced transitions in the narrative flow. Human coders rely on deeper contextual understanding, such as recognizing when a philosophical statement concludes a central theme, while GPT-4o may depend too heavily on surface-level patterns like sentence structure or keywords, leading to misaligned coding. Another factor is the lack of cultural or emotional depth. As an AI, GPT-4o processes language through algorithms and datasets, excelling at identifying structural patterns but often missing subtle emotional or cultural cues that human coders use to define narrative endpoints. For instance, the transition between the emotional farewell to Ms. Ong and the protagonist's return to a more challenging environment requires an understanding of the shift in tone, which GPT-4o might not fully grasp. Additionally, there is overlap in thematic content, especially in personal and emotional stories, where certain narrative moves serve multiple functions. In this case, the sentences in M7 that reflect Ms. Ong's departure and the change in the protagonist's circumstances could logically be seen as both the conclusion of M7 and the beginning of M8. Human coders, with their experience and interpretive judgment, are better suited to navigating such overlaps, whereas GPT-4o might struggle to determine where one function ends and another begins. Finally, the cyclical nature of certain moves presents challenges. The repetition of Moves 4 (Complicating the story) and 6 (Dealing with the complication) shows how stories loop through similar thematic stages. This cyclical structure could confuse GPT-4o's more linear approach to move segmentation, whereas human coders are better equipped to recognize and mark the recurrence of moves and their significance in the narrative.

Even though there are slight differences between GPT-4o and human coders in the determination of the start and end points for the moves, this does not affect the range, frequency, and sequence of the moves. This suggested that GPT-4o could identify moves in narrative short stories and that it followed a structured process. It began with Phase 1: Text Extraction and Cleaning, where the narrative text was extracted and cleaned to focus solely on the story's content. In Phase 2: Text Understanding and Analysis, GPT-4o thoroughly read the cleaned text to grasp the narrative's characters, plot, and key events. Phase 3: Move Identification and Tagging involved classifying text chunks according to the eight moves and determining their start and endpoints. During Phase 4: Annotation and Description, GPT-4o annotated these moves, underlined parts that illustrated each move's function, and provided brief descriptions. Phase 5: Recurring Move Analysis involves examining the narrative for



recurring moves and their effects on the story's cyclical progression. The information was then organized into a table in Phase 6: Table Creation and Summary, detailing Move No., Functions, Start & End Points, and Descriptions. Finally, Phase 7: Review and Adjustment ensured that the table and annotations were accurate and aligned with Jiang et al.'s (2024) model, providing a comprehensive analysis of the narrative.

### The Essentiality and Frequency of Moves in Narrative Short Stories

**Table 4: Essentiality of Moves in 50 Narrative Short Stories from *Tests & Us* (Volumes 2 & 3)**

Narrative Short Stories (N=50)	Moves	No. of Stories	Inclusion Rates	Essentiality
	Move 1	50	100%	Obligatory
	Move 2	50	100%	Obligatory
	Move 3	50	100%	Obligatory
	Move 4	50	100%	Obligatory
	Move 5	50	100%	Obligatory
	Move 6	50	100%	Obligatory
	Move 7	49	98%	Conventional
	Move 8	45	90%	Conventional

Based on the results in Table 4, a 100% inclusion rate of Move 1 to 6 makes these moves all obligatory in the 50 narrative short stories from *Tests & Us* (Volumes 2 & 3). A total of 98% and 90% inclusion rate for Moves 7 and 8 were shown respectively, making them conventional moves. There were no optional moves found in this study. The results indicated that for the 1st stage (Orientation) and 2nd stage (Incident), the moves are consistently present, highlighting their fundamental role in structuring the narrative. For the 3rd stage (Conclusion), the high inclusion rates of Moves 7 and 8 demonstrate their significant, though not essential, role in enhancing the narrative. This stage consolidates the narrative's main idea and provides closure, which is crucial for reader satisfaction and the overall coherence of the story.

Imagine a narrative short story as a meticulously crafted house. For the obligatory moves, Setting the scene (Move 1) is akin to laying the foundation of the house, providing the essential groundwork without which the entire structure would be unstable. This foundational move is supported by Martin & Rose (2008), who emphasize the necessity of establishing context to ground the reader. Laying out the event (Move 2) acts like the walls that define the space within the house, organizing the sequence of occurrences. According to Swales (1990), the logical progression of events is crucial for maintaining coherence in academic writing, which parallels narrative storytelling. Given that the current situation (Move 3) is comparable to erecting a roof, creating a temporary shelter before the storm of complications hits. This move prepares readers for the upcoming conflict, akin to how a roof protects the interior from external elements. Complicating the story (Move 4) is like introducing architectural elements that challenge the structure, such as intricate staircases or unconventional designs. These elements disrupt the normalcy and create intrigue. Bruner (1991) highlights the importance of conflict and disruption in narrative construction, which aligns with this move. Evaluating the status quo (Move 5) can be seen as the interior load-bearing walls that sustain the tension and weight of the structure. Martin & Rose (2008) note that evaluation increases narrative tension, essential for engaging the reader. Dealing with the complication (Move 6) is like the structural reinforcements that resolve any weaknesses, ensuring the house stands firm. This move

provides the necessary resolution, analogous to resolving structural issues in a building.

For the conventional moves, Foregrounding the main idea (Move 7) is like the interior design that highlights the house's theme, bringing cohesion and aesthetic appeal. This move reinterprets the story's central theme, making it more impactful. Previous studies, such as Labov (1972), emphasize the importance of a coda or resolution that reiterates the narrative's core message. However, in the data analysed by the researcher, sometimes authors intentionally do not explicitly state the theme, leaving space for readers to guess, ponder, and reflect. For example, in the third story, "Two Hours", written by Vahid Nimechisalem, the author does not use Move 7 in the Conclusion stage to directly highlight the theme, which is the value of time. Instead, the author advances the plot by describing how the protagonist, Elissa, does not need to continue answering the unfinished questions in her first formal English exam. When she leaves the exam room and returns home, she learns from her parents the meaning of the "two hours" noted at the top of the exam paper. This approach of resolving the suspense without directly revealing the theme is intended to leave space for readers to think deeply about the theme, thereby achieving the effect of conveying boundless meaning through limited words. This subtlety allows the story's deeper significance to emerge from the narrative, encouraging readers to engage in reflection and interpretation.

Ending the story (Move 8) is akin to the final touches and furnishings that make the house feel complete and lived-in. This move provides closure, comparable to how finishing touches make a house feel like a home. Research by Thornbury & Slade (2006) indicates that effective narrative endings provide a sense of closure and satisfaction, enhancing the overall storytelling experience. As observed by the researcher, some authors also intentionally omit Move 8. For example, in Rong Lu's short story "I'd Rather Be a Student", the teacher recounts a difficult experience with a student named Dick. Despite the teacher's efforts to establish clear rules and grading criteria, Dick shows disinterest, misses classes, and fails to give his oral presentations. As the semester progresses, Dick avoids penalties for absences and manages to sit for the final exam, despite his poor performance. The story reaches a turning point when Mr. Black, the department head and Dick's relative, pressures the teacher to pass Dick despite his inadequate performance. Torn between professional integrity and career concerns, the teacher reluctantly adjusts Dick's exam answers to ensure he passes. The story ends with the teacher feeling ashamed and disheartened, reflecting on the gap between her personal values and her role's demands. The omission of Move 8, typically a clear statement or return to the present, serves several key purposes. Firstly, it amplifies the emotional impact by leaving the narrative open-ended, preserving the teacher's internal conflict and disillusionment. This lack of resolution underscores the moral ambiguity and unresolved tension, encouraging readers to engage deeply with the teacher's ethical and personal dilemmas. The absence of this move highlights the teacher's internal struggle rather than offering a neat conclusion or moral lesson. This narrative choice emphasizes her feelings of shame and frustration with the educational system, focusing on her emotional experience rather than resolving the external conflict. It aligns with the story's theme of systemic unfairness. The omission also invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of the story. Without a clear closure, the narrative prompts readers to consider their perspectives on fairness, integrity, and the challenges within the educational system, highlighting the real-life consequences of systemic issues. Finally, not including Move 8 maintains the story's ambiguity and complexity. The open-ended nature of the ending leaves a lasting impression of the protagonist's unresolved conflict, enhancing the emotional resonance of the narrative and reflecting the ongoing and unresolved nature of real-life educational issues.

**Table 5: Occurrence Frequency of Moves in 50 Narrative Short Stories from *Tests & Us* (Volumes 2 & 3)**

Narrative Short Stories (N=50)	Moves	Occurrences of Moves	Percentage of Frequency
	Move 1	50	10.5%
	Move 2	50	10.5%
	Move 3	50	10.5%
	Move 4	80	16.7%
	Move 5	79	16.5%
	Move 6	75	15.7%
	Move 7	49	10.3%
	Move 8	45	9.4%
	<b>Overall</b>	<b>478</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 5 shows the total instances or the total number of moves used in the 50 narrative short stories from *Tests & Us (Volumes 2 & 3)*. The total number of moves across these stories is 478, and each move contributes differently in terms of frequency.

From the data, Move 4, “Complicating the story”, is the most frequent, occurring 80 times and accounting for 16.7% of all moves. This high frequency suggests that complications, crises, or climactic moments are central to narrative storytelling, aligning with the idea that tension or conflict is essential to keep readers engaged (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). The close follow-up by Move 5, “Evaluating the status quo” (79 occurrences, 16.5%), further emphasizes that narratives often involve reflecting on or assessing the complication, which adds depth to the story and conveys character emotions or moral lessons (Bamberg, 2012). As a natural progression, Move 6, “Dealing with the complication,” follows this assessment and focuses on how characters actively respond to the crises they face. This move, occurring 75 times (15.7%), illustrates the resolution or attempt to manage the complications, showing that resolving or addressing crises is a critical step in narrative development.

For example, in the short story *I’m a Cat* by Diyah Indiyati, the author portrays the deep bond between a cat and its master, who struggles to achieve a higher IELTS score, ultimately finding comfort in the cat’s unwavering emotional support. Two sets of Move 4, Move 5 and Move 6 are used, meaning these three moves appear cyclically.

In the first set, Moves 4, 5, and 6 play critical roles in developing the master’s journey from frustration to renewed hope.

Move 4: Complicating the story

In this move, the master’s frustration with his tutor comes to the forefront: “*On a dreadfully hot afternoon, he grabbed me and put me on his lap, saying that his tutor was always demeaning his speaking effort.*” This complication reveals the emotional burden he carries due to an unsupportive learning environment, where the tutor’s harsh criticism discourages him rather than helping him improve. The master’s decision to find a new tutor reflects his determination to address this challenge, setting the stage for further development in the story.

Move 5: Evaluating the status quo

The evaluation of the situation occurs after the master finds a new, supportive tutor who offers constructive feedback: “*Don’t worry, Andi, just learn one step at a time. Try to use more words in one sentence.*” This move highlights the turning point in the master’s journey, where the new tutor provides clear guidance on how to improve his speaking skills. The contrast with the

previous tutor's demeaning approach shows the positive impact of an encouraging teacher, as the master begins to build confidence and see progress in his preparation for the IELTS exam.

#### Move 6: Dealing with the complication

In this move, the master actively addresses his challenge by embracing the new tutor's guidance and regaining his confidence: *"This time seemed different; his confidence grew bigger with this new tutor. I'll have my speaking test today, Fluffy, and I'm very confident more than ever. I'm all set."* The master's renewed optimism demonstrates his resilience and ability to overcome setbacks. He prepares for the speaking test with a sense of readiness, showing that he has successfully dealt with the previous complication by finding a better learning environment.

In the second set, we see another cycle of challenge, reflection, and response, this time focusing on the emotional impact of the master's test results and the cat's role in comforting him.

#### Move 4: Complicating the story

The complication arises when the master eagerly awaits the results of his IELTS test: *"The result came two weeks after the test, as I saw a postman put it inside the letterbox outside the house. My master sprinted eagerly to pick up that document, ripped its seal, and opened the one-page document."* This marks a significant moment of hope and anticipation, but the complication is introduced when the master's expectations are dashed by the disappointing test results. The high hopes he had for success are shattered, setting the stage for the emotional challenge he must now face.

#### Move 5: Evaluating the status quo

The evaluation occurs as the master reacts to his disappointing score of 5.5: *"Suddenly, his body slipped onto the couch and his eyes looked away. The paper sagged down to the floor."* This evaluation highlights the emotional weight of the setback, as the master's body language reflects his deep sense of failure and frustration. Despite all his hard work and newfound confidence, the score signifies that his efforts have fallen short, leading to emotional deflation and introspection.

#### Move 6: Dealing with the complication

Dealing with the complication is shown when the cat responds to the master's distress: *"I walk, approaching him, to the couch and jump onto his lap. I give him the best language I have learned so far: a gentle purr and a soft head butting."* The cat's actions provide emotional comfort, offering a non-verbal way of addressing the master's sadness. Though the problem (the test score) remains unsolved, the cat helps the master cope with his emotions, showing the strength of their bond. This move reflects the narrative's focus on emotional support rather than a direct resolution of the external issue, emphasizing that sometimes comfort and companionship are the best ways to handle disappointment.

In this set of moves, the master's emotional arc is explored deeply, showing how complications and emotional challenges can be met with compassion and non-verbal communication, reinforcing the theme of resilience in the face of setbacks.

In addition to Moves 4, 5, and 6, Moves 1, 2, and 3 each appear 50 times (10.5%), indicating the importance of establishing the setting and context early in the stories, a common technique to immerse readers in the narrative world. Finally, Move 7, "Foregrounding the main idea" (49 occurrences, 10.3%), and Move 8, "Ending the story" (45 occurrences, 9.4%), are the least frequent, suggesting that while conclusions and reflections are important, they take up less narrative space than the development and resolution of the plot. This might reflect a tendency

in storytelling to prioritize the progression of action and conflict over the denouement (Bruner, 1990).

## Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the capabilities of GPT-4o in conducting rhetorical move analysis on narrative short stories based on the theme of language assessment. By adopting Jiang et al.'s (2024) eight-move model, the results indicate that GPT-4o's move identification aligned closely with human coders, despite small differences in the segmentation of certain moves. The discrepancies in move segmentation are likely due to GPT-4o's reliance on surface-level patterns, whereas human coders employ deeper contextual understanding, such as emotional or cultural cues, to determine move boundaries. Regarding essentiality, the obligatory moves (Move 1-Move 6) were consistently identified in all stories, while the conventional moves (Move 7 and Move 8) were identified with slightly lower rates. Concerning occurrence, the overall moves totalled 478. Move 4 (Complicating the story) was the most frequent, occurring 80 times (16.7%), followed by Move 5 (Evaluating the status quo) with 79 occurrences (16.5%), and Move 6 (Dealing with the complication) appearing 75 times (15.7%). Move 1 (Setting the scene), Move 2 (Laying out the event), and Move 3 (Giving the current situation) each occurred 50 times (10.5%). Move 7 (Foregrounding the main idea) appeared 49 times (10.3%), and Move 8 (Ending the story) was the least frequent, with 45 occurrences (9.4%). This study demonstrated that GPT-4o is capable of effectively identifying rhetorical moves in narrative short stories. It highlighted the model's ability to analyse narrative structure using an established rhetorical move framework and provided insights into how AI can support textual analysis in creative writing. The findings suggest that AI tools like GPT-4o could be integrated into educational settings to assist with narrative analysis, helping students and educators to better understand story structure and rhetorical strategies.

A limitation of this study is the size of the corpus, as it included only 50 narrative short stories. A larger and more diverse corpus may provide a broader range of rhetorical structures, offering more insights into the model's accuracy and flexibility across different narrative types. Additionally, GPT-4o struggled with subtle transitions between moves, especially when cultural or emotional depth influenced the narrative flow. Further research is recommended to examine GPT-4o's performance across different narrative genres and to refine its capabilities for detecting rhetorical intricacies.

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## Portraying Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore through Murals

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### Abstract

Malaysia and Singapore are neighbouring countries, which were one country in 1963-1965 but they have vastly different legal frameworks that governs murals. This study compares the image of multiculturalism constructed in murals located in Malaysia and Singapore using a social semiotic analysis to find out whether they portray government-sanctioned messages. The study involved the analysis of six murals, three from Malaysia and three from Singapore. The murals were photographed from October to December 2022. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) social semiotic visual analysis was adopted to interpret the representational, interactive, and compositional meanings in the murals. The three murals from Malaysia draw attention to diversity of occupations and ethnic groups. There is a contemporary focus featuring young people in "Faces of Future Generation" and "Kini Lebih Gempak", and a historical focus on past trading activities in "The Mercers". In Singapore, "National Day Celebration 2022" focusses on the present while "Cantonese Opera" and "Singapore Hawker Heritage" focus on the past heritage. The Malaysian murals reflect ethnic diversity whereas the Singaporean murals have an obvious Chinese presence despite the inclusion of various ethnic groups. The findings indicate that the murals helped to propagate government endorsed messages on national integration and unity.

*Keywords:* Multiculturalism, nation-building, murals, Malaysia, Singapore

### Introduction

Murals is art found in public spaces that are accessible to the society. During ancient times, murals were used as a means of communication before the advent of writing. They were also regarded as a propaganda tool and a source of information on the community's voice (Łabędź, 2019). At that time, the artists had to hide their identities to avoid being caught for defacing the wall. Today, contemporary murals are often commissioned by the government or an organisation (Philipps et al., 2017). This is partly why certain murals have lost their contesting character because they are designed to reflect the identity of a place or an organisation. In many cities, these large, colourful, labour-intensive paintings drawn on buildings/walls function as a symbol of modernity and trendiness (Mokras-Grabowska, 2021), attracting tourists for photography purposes. For example, Liang (2017) reported that in just one day (16 April 2017), 478 Asians and 12 Caucasians took photos with the mural "Children on Bicycle" by Ernest Zacharevic in Georgetown, the capital city of Penang, Malaysia while 346 Asians and 82 Caucasians passed by without taking a photo. Murals also enrich the material dimension of a landscape and becoming an iconic symbol of a place (Skinner & Jolliffe, 2017).

The history of contemporary mural painting began in 1910 during the Mexican Revolution to overthrow a long-time president. In public spaces, artists painted the life and struggles of Mexican farmers and workers to express their thoughts (Greeley, 2012). When the revolution ended, these artists were invited by the new government to re-paint their works to convey the



new government's ideas on political and social issues. During the post-revolutionary period, the works of three Mexican painters mediated between the state and the nation (Greeley, 2012). In Northern Ireland, murals also conveyed political views. The first mural painted in the 20th century declared loyalty to the British crown. Subsequently, in the early 1970s, the murals began to cover other issues, including media censorship, police brutality, the Irish language, and women's rights (Lyell, 2001). These murals served aesthetic purposes and an avenue for the expression of societal and political issues (Wiśniewska, 2020). By the end of the 20th century, the functions of murals expanded into economic, political, commemorative, commercial, and artistic purposes (Skinner & Jolliffe, 2017).

Murals can inspire society to think and enter into dialogues with one another. In most cases, the image poses more important messages than the text (Gralińska-Toborek, 2019). Murals usually reflect the sociocultural and historical context in which they have been constructed and painted. In Malaysia, Ong's (2021) analysis of 84 murals in Georgetown, Penang, showed that the images sent messages of multiculturalism (Ong, 2021). However, Ong and Ting's (2023) analysis of 10 murals showcased in the 2020 Penang International Container Art Festival showed segregation according to ethnic and occupational groups. The notion of multiculturalism presented is one where different cultures "combine like a salad, as opposed to the more traditional notion of a cultural melting pot" (Baofu, 2012, p. 22). In Malaysia, much of the academic publications on murals concentrated on the heritage value of murals in Penang (e.g., Ong, 2021; Ong & Ting, 2023; Razali et al., 2023; Sadatiseyedmahalleh et al., 2015; Stephen, 2016). Murals in other places have largely been not studied. Sakip et al.'s (2016) study in Ipoh, Perak was about association of murals with crime sites. However, mural artists have not yet been fined for vandalism in Malaysia. The laws governing murals, Copyright Act 1987 and the National Heritage Act 2005, do not clearly indicate whether artists will face legal consequences (Salim, 2024). In fact, the December 2010 initiative by the Kuala Lumpur town hall to host the KUL Sign Festival paved the way for graffiti artists to show their work legally for the first time and it is now an annual event (InsideAsia Tours, n.d.). Little is known about how the permissive legal framework for urban art in Malaysia translates to messages in the murals.

However, Singapore has strict laws on graffiti, and murals are considered as art by some or vandalism of public spaces by others (Affandi, 2022). Singapore has recently acknowledged graffiti and street art as a subculture in the "Renaissance City", a place where arts and culture from all over the world can be displayed and consumed (Koh, 2018). However, strict legal intervention persists. Chang (2020) stated that some graffiti and street art artists have made use of opportunities given by the government to display their work but others have resisted the requirement to apply for licence to paint on designated walls. Some daring artists may add their satirical and/or symbolical visual messages into a commissioned mural after the draft has been inspected (Valjakka, 2021). In fact, commissioned art works also appear on void decks in public residential environments in Singapore, and arts organisations are coming forward to coordinate activities (Chang, 2022). Academic publications on murals in Singapore such as these lean towards assessment of the situation but there is a paucity of findings on messages in murals.

Considering the different legal frameworks that govern murals in Malaysia and Singapore, which share a common political history in 1963-1965, this study compares the image of multiculturalism constructed in murals located in Malaysia and Singapore using a social semiotic analysis. The first part provides a brief history of Malaysia and Singapore, followed by the site of data collection and framework of analysis. Subsequently, we present the analysis of the murals and discuss whether they portray government-sanctioned messages.

## **Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore**

From the colonial days to the present, Malaysia and Singapore have taken multiculturalism into consideration in their policies (Goh, 2008). Their multiethnic communities—comprising locals, indigenous people, and migrants—have persisted in practising their cultures and traditions, which resulted in cultural pluralism. The multiethnic diversity has also extended to religious beliefs where various religions coexist, and the act of ostracising other religions is prohibited (Black, 2012). Additionally, multilingualism continues with the maintenance of mother tongue languages while English remains an important language of international trade and the global economy. In brief, multiculturalism is crucial for both countries, serving as an “effective public policy” that enhances national competitiveness (Ng & Metz, 2015, p. 253).

### **Malaysia**

Malaysia has a population of 32.7 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023), comprising the Bumiputera (Malays and indigenous people) (69.6%), Chinese (22.6%), Indians (6.8%), and others (1.0%). Eberhard et al. (2023) estimate there are 111 living indigenous languages and 20 living non-indigenous languages, while two indigenous languages have become extinct.

Malaysia was colonised by the British in 1771. As the Malays were “unwilling to work for wages” (Andaya & Andaya, 2016, p. 182), Chinese and Indian migrants were imported to work primarily in tin mines and rubber estates to build the economy. The Malays were mostly fishermen and farmers in rural areas. Such a system led to ethnic segregation, which hinders national integration (Chai, 1977). Later, the Chinese gradually moved to bigger towns and set up grocery shops. Some brought their wives from China, while others married local women, which gave rise to the Peranakan culture. Some Indians joined the civil service, particularly as police officers and teachers. From agriculture, the Malays also moved into other occupations.

The maintenance of ethnic languages by ethnic groups date back to the colonial period when there were schools using four languages of instruction: English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. After independence in 1957, English became the language of economic opportunity and academic achievement in urban areas. This led to frustrations among the Malays, who felt that political and economic power lay with those who spoke English. To solve the issue, Malay was adopted as the national language, resulting in a change from English to Malay-medium of education. English continued to function as the official language, which caused uneasiness among the Malay advocates. The National Language Act 1967 was passed, and consequently, Malay became the sole national and official language of Malaysia. Malay was the language of administration, education, and law courts. Additionally, the Bumiputera (indigenous and Malay people) was given more privileges in education and work opportunities in the government sector (David & Govindasamy, 2005) that extended to customary land rights. Islam is the official religion but other religions can be practised.

After the 1969 racial clash, the Malaysian government took measures to address racial tensions (Andaya & Andaya, 2016). The government guaranteed the teaching and learning of languages besides Malay to accommodate the use of other languages. English played the role of an unofficial language and was taught in school as a subject. The Chinese and Indian communities continued speaking their dialects, as did the indigenous and other small ethnic communities. On 31 August 1970, a new ideology, Rukunegara (Articles of Faith of the State), was introduced to foster unity among all ethnic communities. Affirmative action in the form of the New Economic Policy (NEP) was implemented to reduce poverty and create more jobs for the Malays. The NEP translated to more allocation for the Bumiputera in government services,

student enrolment in public universities, and additional discounts when purchasing properties. Noor and Leong (2013) argue that NEP was introduced because the Malays were afraid of losing their political power when the Chinese became strong economically. The income per capita for the Malays and Chinese reflected a huge difference and have continued to double as time passed (Saari et al., 2015). Jomo (2004, p. 1) sees the NEP as “positive discrimination” to help the economically disadvantaged. Indeed Sukemi et al.’s (2023) analysis of equity data for 42 years for ethnicity holdings shows the wealth distribution through growing economy rather than through the acquisition of other ethnic ownership, especially Chinese ethnic ownership, which was later transferred to Bumiputera.

However, critics of the NEP focussed on the undermining of social cohesion. NEP was “based on the notion that Malaya was a Malay country and that it belonged only to the Malays” (Vasil, 1980, pp. 37-38). Malay privileges encapsulated in NEP engender ethnic polarisation (Lee, 2023; Lee, 2024). Lim and Hunter (2023) argue that a new social justice paradigm that is not group-based is needed to drive dynamism. The government is aware of the ethnic cleavages, as seen in the slogans by various prime ministers, such as the 1Malaysia policy by Najib Razak in 2009 and Madani Malaysia by the current prime minister Anwar Ibrahim. To appease the non-Malays, the government has allowed private tertiary institutions to be established, opening up higher education opportunities to non-Malays (Loh, 2002). An allowance was made on the regulation to use Malay as the medium of instruction. These tertiary institutions could use to promote Malaysia as a regional centre of higher education.

However, where murals are concerned, the regulation on the use of Malay remains. The Verification Procedures of National Language in Advertising (Federal Territory) by-law 1982 states that:

An advertisement has to be in the Malay language on its own or together with other language(s). The wordings in the Malay language have to be given priority in terms of colour and have to be placed in a clearer position than wordings of other language(s).

Because of this, Malay is in larger font size than other languages in shop signs in Georgetown, Penang (Ben Said & Ong, 2019) and official signs in Chinese-medium schools (Kretzer & Ong, 2022).

## **Singapore**

Singapore has a population of 5.64 million (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2023), comprising Chinese (74.1%), Malays (13.5%), Indians (9.0%), and other ethnicities (3.3%). According to Eberhard et al. (2023), there are two living indigenous languages and 20 living non-indigenous languages.

In 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore, which had only 120 Malays and 30 Chinese (Kwan-Terry, 2000). Strategic location along the spice route enabled Singapore to develop into a commercial and military centre. Malay, Chinese, and Indian migrants were imported to meet manpower needs. The Malays lived in the villages, the Chinese in Chinatown, and the Indians in Serangoon Road, and these developed into ethnic enclaves.

After World War II, Singapore was returned to the British and later became self-governing in 1959. In 1963, the Malaysian Federation was formed with Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore. A key factor that led to the separation in 1965 was Singapore’s disagreement over any policy of preferential treatment to a particular ethnic community. Singapore became an independent state and was committed to envisioning a Singapore national culture and ideology rather than basing it on its dominant Chinese population.

In 1989, the Ethnic Integration Policy was introduced to prevent any ethnic community from

concentrating in a public residential estate. Despite controversies over the requirement on ethnic proportions of owners and tenants, the Singapore government continued with this intervention for nation-building and to prevent racial riots (Sim et al., 2003). Cultural festivals are celebrated in community centres. Lim et al. (2019) claimed that the Ethnic Integration Policy helps to achieve interethnic integration. The 2018 Household Survey (Housing & Development Board (HDB), 2023) shows that 96.9% of residents were satisfied with neighbourly relations, exchanging greetings, and engaging in casual conversations. Their sense of belonging to their estates has also increased from 98.6% in 2008 to 99.0% in 2018 (HDB, 2023). However, for mural artist Yip Yew Chong, the HDB flats may be cleaner, but Chinatown shophouses represent his childhood and those of other Singaporeans of his age group (Woon, 2023). Urban planning now encompasses commissioned murals to inculcate ethnic integration messages (Menkhoff et al., 2024), including those in HDB flats.

The Singapore government also introduced Racial Harmony Week to remind Singaporeans of the vulnerabilities associated with racial diversity. Students from preschools to secondary schools participate in cultural activities. Each main religion—Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity—is given public holidays to recognise the diversity in religion.

During the British rule, English-medium education was used to train people for government administration while Malay-medium education remained because Malays are considered indigenous people. Mandarin- and Tamil-medium education was left to the respective ethnic communities. After independence, the medium of instruction was changed to English and it was identified as the interracial language of communication, education, and economy (Moore, 2000).

To retain Singaporeans' roots and cultural identity and avoid the potential negative effect of being Westernised, the mother tongue policy was established. At the national level, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil are official mother tongue languages but the usage has declined. To encourage ethnic communities to retain its culture, language, and heritage linked to its roots (Lee, 2005), students are required to take the mother tongue subject based on their parents' ethnicity. Kwan-Terry (2000) found that the Speak Mandarin Campaign resulted in an increased usage of Mandarin and the decreased use of Chinese dialects.

But in reality, it is English (the most important of the four designated official languages in Singapore, not just internally for inter-ethnic communication but also externally for global trade and international communication) and Mandarin (with the ascension of China on the world stage) that are dominant (Tang, 2020). Language planning and policy in Singapore has been termed as driven by a narrative of linguistic instrumentalism (Wee, 2003), leading to processes of linguistic hierarchisation, stemming from the instrumental value and linguistic capital (Silver, 2005) attached to each of these languages in Singapore.

Since the 1980s, Singapore saw an influx of foreign labour. The country adopted liberal immigration policies that focus on skilled and semi-skilled labour. Some of the foreign workers married locals, and their children were born in Singapore and given Singapore citizenship. These children attend local schools and learn about the meaning of Singaporean identity.

## **Methodology**

Three areas in Malaysia and three areas in Singapore were selected for data collection due to their popularity for hosting local and international artists to paint murals.

In Malaysia, the cities of Georgetown, Kuala Lumpur, and Kuching were selected. Georgetown and Kuching are the capital cities of Penang and Sarawak respectively, and Kuala Lumpur is

the capital of Malaysia. Georgetown is a pioneer location in Malaysia that has hosted murals events since 2012. As Ong (2021) had studied the murals in Georgetown, murals away from the city centre (Air Itam, Balik Pulau, and Pulau Tikus) were analysed. Among them is “Faces of Future Generation” (Mural 1). As for Kuching, some well-known murals pay tribute to ethnic communities that are indigenous to Sarawak (Mural 2, “The Mercers”). The murals in Kuala Lumpur were those drawn by local artists (Mural 3, “Kini Lebih Gempak”).

In Singapore, the murals analysed were those found in of Kampong Gelam, Chinatown, and Little India. Kampong Gelam is one of the oldest urban quarters allocated for the Malay, Arab, and Bugis communities by Sir Stamford Raffles. In Malay, kampong means compound, while gelam refers to a long-leaved paperbank tree used for making boats and medicine. A prominent landmark there is the Sultan Mosque built in 1824 by Sultan Hussein Shah. The alleys hosted Singapore’s first outdoor art gallery with the work of international and local artists. Recent years have seen the growth of mural painting around Chinatown. Meanwhile, Little India in Serangoon Road has alleys full of artwork painted by local and international artists dating back to the 19th century. The three Singapore murals analysed were “National Day 2022” (Mural 4), “Cantonese Opera” (Mural 5), and “Singapore Hawker Heritage” (Mural 6).

The murals were selected to include those, which portray the historical aspect (Mural 2, “The Mercers”, Malaysia; Mural 5, Cantonese Opera, “Singapore”; Mural 6, “Singapore Hawker Heritage”) and the contemporary situation (Mural 1, “Faces of Future Generation”, Malaysia; Mural 3, “Kini Lebih Gempak”, Malaysia; Mural 4, “National Day 2022”, Singapore).

Data collection took place from October to December 2022. Murals were photographed with a digital camera and field notes related to the locations were made. Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2021) social semiotic visual analysis was adopted to interpret the three dimensions of meanings in the murals.

The first dimension, representational, deals with the concrete and abstract depiction of participants – people, places, and things – in a diagram. This dimension focuses on analysing the visual semantic features (e.g., appearance and physical features) and visual syntactic patterns (e.g., their function and relation to each other). The representational dimension is further divided into narrative representation (presence of a vector or line to connect participants) and conceptual representation (absence of vector).

The second dimension, interactive, focuses on how images create interactions between viewers and the world that is represented in the picture. The analysis takes account of three factors – distance, contact, and point of view. The distance between the represented world and the viewer can be close up (head and shoulders), medium shot (up to waist or knee), and long shot (full figure). The contacts with viewers are further divided into “demand image” (people inside the picture look directly at the viewer and demand something) and “offer image” (people inside the picture offer information, goods, and services, but have no direct eye contact with the viewer). Analysis also takes account of point of view, people, places, and things (e.g., depicted from above, below or at eye-level, and from front, side, and back).

The third dimension, compositional, deals with information value, framing, salience, and modality. Information value refers to an analysis of the position of a particular element, whether it is placed on the left or right, centre or at the margin, upper or lower part in the picture. The framing requires an analysis of the connection of the elements, such as disconnected (separated identities) or connected through frame lines (representation of belonging). The analysis of salience deals with the positioning of the picture and the amount of space taken up. Features such as colour, use of lighting, and presence of gestures to attract viewer’s attention are also analysed. The analysis of modality focuses on determining how real

the images in the picture are.

## Findings

This section presents the results for the social semiotic analysis before the content of the murals are described.

### Social Semiotic Analysis of Murals

This section presents results on the representational dimension of the murals (Table 1), interactiveness (Table 2), and composition of the images (Table 3).

Table 1 shows the results for representational dimension, which focuses on depiction of people, place, and things in the murals. The images of people usually highlight ethnicity and occupational groups.

**Table 1: Representational dimension of social semiotic analysis of the murals**

Murals	Representation Dimension	
	Conceptual	Narrative
1. Faces of Future Generation	The images of faces of women and men in different uniforms or performing different actions represent different occupations of the people in Malaysia.	A vector is formed by the front faces of three women. It is a non-transactive image because we can see the three women but what they are looking at is not clear to viewers. This is similar for the back women and men.
2. The Mercers	The image of two textile traders – one was seen holding onto his bicycle that contained folded textiles while another one was seen grabbing a roll of red textile – represents the textile industry in Malaysia.	Both traders' hands were holding onto the bicycle and rolled textile form diagonal vectors.
3. Kini Lebih Gempak	The image of a girl, dressed up in bright yellow sweater with her large headphones and cap, is running. The two can drinks are a new brand.	A horizontal vector is formed between the campaign tagline and the girl. It is a non-transactive image because we can see the girl running but we do not know what she is looking at.
4. National Day 2022	Images of several photo-framed pictures of a variety of citizens and two families watching fireworks at a riverbank.	Vectors are formed by the vertical strings of fireworks and the various photo-framed pictures. The photo-framed pictures are non-transactive because we do not know what the citizens are looking at.
5. Cantonese Opera	The image has people of different ethnic groups – five opera singers were performing on stage, audiences were watching the	A diagonal vector is formed between the opera singers and the audiences, connecting them together in the show. Two diagonal

	performance, an ice-cream seller was selling ice-cream to two children, a man was delivering food to an opera singer behind the stage, a rojak (local salad) seller waiting for customers.	vectors are also formed between the ice-cream seller and the girl, and the deliveryman and the opera singer.
6. Singapore Hawker Heritage	The images of a hawker frying koay teow (flat noodles), several other hawkers selling snacks, and children playing ‘tossing the stones’ game represent the liveliness in a market scene.	A diagonal vector is formed by the hawker’s action of frying noodles as he gazes at the wok. Similarly, a diagonal vector is formed by the children as their gaze points to the stones. Diagonal vectors are also formed by the two female hawkers looking at the snacks they are selling.

Table 2 presents the results on the second dimension, interactive, which focuses on how images interact with viewers from a distance and point of view. In terms of distance, the three medium shot images draw attention to the people portrayed in the murals while the three long shot images draw attention to the background scenes that characterise either Malaysia or Singapore. In terms of contact, five of six murals are offer images where the people offer their products or services. As for point of view, most images are depicted at eye-level and presented from the front view to engage viewers.

**Table 2: Interactive dimension of social semiotic analysis of the murals**

Murals	Interactive Dimension		
	Distance	Contact	Point of View
1. Faces of Future Generation	Medium shot of the three women from waist up.	Offer image. The three women offer hope for future generations.	Image is depicted from above and at eye-level (based on the three main women). Two are from the side while one is from the front.
2. The Mercers	Medium shot of the two textile traders from thigh up.	Offer image. Both textile traders offer their textile for sale.	Image is depicted below eye-level and from the front.
3. Kini Lebih Gempak	Medium shot of the girl from waist up.	Offer image. The girl offers her energy to fit with the campaign tagline.	Image is depicted at eye-level and from the side.
4. National Day 2022	Long shot of both families.	Half of the image is an offer image because the framed-photos offer hope to viewers. The other half image is neither offer nor demand	Image is depicted at eye-level. Half the image is from the front while half is from the back.

		image because both families' backs face viewers.	
5. Cantonese Opera	Long shot features the opera singers, viewers, and other food sellers.	Offer image. The five opera singers offer their performance to audiences.	Image is depicted at eye-level. The opera singers are shown from the front while the audiences are shown from the back.
6. Singapore Hawker Heritage	Long shot of the hawkers and children.	Offer image. The hawkers offer their food to the viewers.	Image is depicted below eye-level and from the front.

Table 3 presents the analysis of the third dimension, composition, which shows the position of the human figures in the mural. In terms of framing, the lines in the murals draw attention to their actions that show their occupations. The people in the murals are given salience through the vivid colours and large size except for fifth mural (Kini Lebih Gempak), which incidentally is the only mural employing a graffiti style. The other five murals are photo-like, making the images look real.

**Table 3: Compositional dimension of social semiotic analysis of the murals**

Murals	Compositional Dimension			
	Information Value	Framing	Salience	Modality
1. Faces of Future Generation	Three women are placed at the centre while there are other athletes occupying the entire background.	The three women and others are separate identities but still connected. The mural shows different occupations.	The three women are the most salient, occupying two-thirds of the mural and they blend into the background with other athletes.	Photo-like painting makes the image real.
2. The Mercers	The Chinese textile trader occupies the left side while the Malay textile trader occupies the right side. They stand next to each other.	Both textile traders are connected as they work in the same industry.	The two textile traders are the most salient and their textile blend into the mural.	Photo-like painting makes the image real.
3. Kini Lebih Gempak	The campaign tagline and two can drinks	There are no frame lines but the hoop	The most salient in the mural is the tagline	Grffiti style makes the image unreal –



	occupy the left side while the girl is placed in the middle. On the right side are other can drinks and decorations.	separates the girl and the campaign tagline.	campaign and the two cans of drinks. The girl and other decorations are less salient although several can drinks are seen in the decorations.	classified as a diagram.
4. National Day 2022	Nine framed-photos occupied half of the mural (left) while a tree and two families occupy the other half (right).	The two families watching fireworks and the nine framed-photos are separate identities. However, they are still connected as the mural shows different ways of celebrating independence.	The two families watching fireworks are the most salient. Of secondary salience is the photo-framed images that are placed at the left side of the mural.	Photo-like painting makes the image real.
5. Cantonese Opera	The five opera singers and audiences occupy the centre space while food sellers are seen on both right and left sides.	Three main groups of people – opera singers, food sellers, audiences – are linked together because the mural shows the scene of an event.	The five opera singers are the most salient, occupying the centre position of the mural, while the audiences are the second most salience.	Photo-like painting makes the image real.
6. Singapore Hawker Heritage	The koay teow cart is placed on the left side while the two other hawkers are placed on the right side.	The hawkers are linked together because their goal is to sell food to customers.	The koay teow hawker is the most salient in the mural. The second most salient is the hawkers squatting to sell their food at floor level (right side of the mural).	Photo-like painting makes the image real.

### Themed Descriptions of Murals

#### Mural 1: “Faces of Future Generation” by Andha.Ras, Malaysia

Drawn by Andha.Ras, “Faces of Future Generation” is located in Gurney Paragon, Pulau Tikus, Penang. The mural depicts the faces of several young women and men. A nurse, school girl guide, and girl scout are seen in the foreground. The background shows sports people (e.g., badminton player, cyclist, archer) indicating Malaysia’s visibility in the international sports tournaments. Besides highlighting a diversity of occupations, this mural also shows different ethnic groups indicated by different skin colour tones.



**Figure 1. “Faces of Future Generation” in Gurney Paragon, Pulau Tikus, Penang (Source: Andha.Ras)**

#### Mural 2: “The Mercers” by Leonard Siaw, Malaysia

“The Mercers” is drawn by Leonard Siaw on the wall of a shophouse in India Street, Kuching. “The Mercers” features two pioneer textile traders, Wee Aik Oh and Sayed Ahmad. Wee, a Chinese textile shop owner, is holding onto his bicycle that carries a stack of folded cloth for making clothes, sheets, and curtains. Ahmad, likely an Indian Muslim wearing a songkok (traditional Malay headgear), and portrayed as the owner of a textile shop as there are many such textile shops in India Street. He is drawn flipping the red cloth, a typical action of textile shop assistants when they show the beauty of the cloth to customers. Both traders began their businesses in the 1930s before World War II, which resulted in the textile trade becoming one of the most significant businesses in Kuching. The mural portrays the contribution of the Chinese and Indian communities in building the economy of Sarawak. Today, the textile industry, which includes apparel designing and production, is one of Malaysia’s fastest-growing sectors (Boon et al., 2013).



**Figure 2. “The Mercers” in Kuching, Malaysia (Source: Leonard Siaw)**

**Mural 3: “Kini Lebih Gempak” by Kenji Chai, Malaysia**

The F&N funky mural, “Kini Lebih Gempak”, is drawn by Kenji Chai, and located on the wall of Bukit Bintang MRT, Kuala Lumpur. This is an advertisement carrying F&N’s new campaign tagline, “Kini Lebih Gempak” (Now cooler/taller). The mural targets young customers by showing a girl in a bright yellow sweater with her large headphones and cap, electronic gadgets, some animals (bird, monkey, panda, dog, cat alluding to Kuching the cat city), and Rafflesia (the largest flower in Sarawak that blooms once a year). Besides the tagline which is in Malay, the F&N flavours are also in Malay (oren for orange, strawberi for strawberry, ais krim soda for soda ice-cream). The use of Malay complies with the Malaysian regulation on the use of Malay in advertisements, the Verification Procedures of National Language in Advertising (Federal Territory) by-law 1982.



**Figure 3. “Kini Lebih Gempak” in Bukit Bintang MRT, Kuala Lumpur (Source: Kenji Chai)**

Taken together, the three murals draw attention to diversity of occupations and ethnic groups in Malaysia. There is also a contemporary focus featuring young people in Murals 1 and 3. Mural 2 highlights older people and is about the history of trading activities in Kuching.

Mural 4: “National Day 2022” by Belinda Low, Singapore

Drawn by Belinda Low, “National Day 2022” features Singapore’s National Day celebration, held on 9 August annually. The mural shows two families watching the national day fireworks from a riverbank. On the right is a couple with two children, somewhat reflective of the current family size in Singapore. In the middle is a father with a child on his shoulders. On the left are eight photos showing citizens of different ethnic groups and occupations—a young boy, two elderly women, a family, a hawker, a bespectacled man, a special needs child, and Singapore’s female president. The Singapore national flag is shown three times to symbolise the country’s national identity. The “National Day 2022” mural shows the diversified society of Singapore today in terms of ethnicity, status, occupation, age, and gender.



**Figure 4. “National Day 2022” in Chinatown, Singapore (Source: Teresa Ong).**

Mural 5: “Cantonese Opera” by Yip Yew Chong, Singapore

The mural titled the “Cantonese Opera” by Yip Yew Chong, is painted onto the wall of a building in Chinatown next to the Sri Mariamman Temple. It shows the opera stage and the spectators, some informally dressed in singlets and shorts. Operas are usually performed in Cantonese. The opera is portrayed as Chinese culture, shown by a Chinese girl in pigtail in the foreground, and other women wearing the samfu (Cheongsam-like top) and trousers. The multi-ethnic society of Singapore is shown by the inclusion of Malay and Indian traders. In the foreground, on the right is a Malay man in songkok and sarong (large tube fabric wrapped around the waist) selling rojak (mixed salad) on his bicycle to the Chinese audience. On the left is a Punjabi man is seen delivering some food to one of the opera singers.



**Figure 5. “Cantonese Opera” in Chinatown, Singapore (Source: Teresa Ong).**

Mural 6: “Singapore Hawker Heritage” by Bibby Low, Singapore

Mural 6 “Singapore Hawker Heritage” is drawn by Bibby Low on the wall of a two-storey building. The background shows old-style shop houses with louvred windows. There is a banner stretching from the left row of shophouses to the right row. It reads “Singapore Hawker Heritage” in English, followed by Chinese at the bottom. This demonstrates the dominance of English in Singapore’s public spaces. English is the most frequently spoken language (48.3%) in the home domain (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2021). The banner is red, the main colour of the Singapore flag. In the foreground is a hawker cart and traders selling a variety of Singaporean food. The Char Koay Teow (stir-fry flat rice noodles) cart catches attention. The English words are above the Chinese words. The positioning shows the importance of English as a commonly spoken language in Singapore, and the association of the hawker food with the Chinese culture. The mural is set in the past as shown by Chinese children playing a traditional game in Malaysia and Singapore, “tossing the stones” in the foreground. The heritage is also evident in the old-style shophouses, and hawkers selling wares in baskets on their shoulders. The old-style shophouses are retained as a site of cultural heritage and Char Koay Teow continues to be a favourite street food. Mural 6 portrays the past because Char Koay Teow is now mostly sold in food courts in shopping malls.



**Figure 6. “Singapore Hawker Heritage” in Chinatown (Source: Teresa Ong).**

Taken together, the three murals in Singapore show the present (“National day celebration 2022”) and the cultural heritage (“Cantonese opera” and “Singapore Hawker Heritage”). These murals have a lot of more details compared to the Malaysian murals. The Chinese presence is obvious in the murals, which is expected because the Chinese population is 74.1% (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2023). However, other ethnic groups are included to portray ethnic diversity.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The social semiotic analysis of the six murals in Malaysia and Singapore produced three key findings. Firstly, the messages of multiculturalism in the murals reflect different everyday realities in the past and present. The murals that portray the past record the ethnic cleavages like Mural 2 (“The Mercers”), which shows an association of the Indian with the textile trade in Kuching, Sarawak, and Mural 5 (“Cantonese Opera”), which shows the association of the Chinese with the performance art in Singapore in the earlier era. However, murals that portray the present index cultural diversity and ethnic integration, although this is merely based on the co-presence of different ethnic groups in the same space. Mural 1 (“Faces of Future Generation”) in Penang, Malaysia and Mural 4 (“National Day 2022”) in Chinatown, Singapore symbolise the ideal of racial unity.

Secondly, the analysis shows that murals that portray the past and the present provide a valuable record of how economic activities are becoming dissociated from ethnic group. In the past, economic activities show an association of ethnic group and occupation (Mural 2, “The Mercers”, Sarawak, Malaysia; Mural 5, “Cantonese Opera”, Singapore). Both murals document traces of past history and are suggestive of distinctive nostalgia (Malykhina, 2020). However, the murals which focus on the present do not associate economic activities with ethnicity. For example, Mural 1 (“Faces of Future Generation”) illustrates several occupations of young women and men in sports, and Mural 3 (“Kini Lebih Gempak”) shows an F&N

advertisement in Malaysia that shows young people venturing into previously-explored businesses and making a good income from it such as being social influencers. For example, influencers in Singapore can earn S\$50 to S\$10,000 per sponsored post, depending on number of followers (Tan, 2023).

Thirdly, murals have grown into a respectable culture and acted as an interchange of ideas and images in recent years (Malykhina, 2020). The murals are no longer drawn secretly by artists. Evidence of murals becoming a respectable culture is the commissioning of the murals by authorities such as Mural 2 (“The Mercers”), where Leonard Siaw was invited to draw the mural and he was paid for it. The municipal councils recognise the value of the murals in portraying the historical identity of the place, and the murals are seen and photographed by many locals and tourists alike. They also appear in many tourism materials used to show the uniqueness of a place. The past prime minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, was seen endorsing murals. He was photographed adding finishing touches on a mural painted by Temenggong Artists-In-Residence to brighten a neighbourhood (Facebook, 2022). This act gives recognition to the value of murals to capture and impart important meanings to the community.

In the field of social semiotics, the present study has shown that images in murals reflect realities and, at the same time, act as a tool to shape realities on ethnic identities and cultural perceptions. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) state, *visuality acts as part of a language and speaks it through expressing meanings*. Visual aspects such as typography, semiotic layout, colour, and symbols may convey meanings better than words. Nevertheless, a limitation of this study is the small sample size, which limits the generalisability of conclusions drawn. In further research, insights can be gained using interviews with mural artists to elicit their motivations and targeted messages in their artwork. Such studies will reveal whether artists consciously align their artwork with government ideals on national unity.

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## Meeting-Style Classroom Approach: Enhancing English Learners' Meeting Competency

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### Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of the Meeting-Style Classroom approach in enhancing English communication skills and meeting competency among Japanese university students. Some studies suggest that professionals from various linguistic backgrounds may face challenges with active participation in English meetings, despite potentially high scores on standardized English tests. The Meeting-Style Classroom aims to address this gap by simulating real-world meeting scenarios while allowing for instructor guidance. The study was conducted across three courses at Japanese universities. A post-course survey assessed students' perceptions of their skill development in areas such as spontaneous speech, opinion expression, and nonverbal communication. Results indicate that while students felt confident in structured speaking scenarios and providing reactions, challenges remained in spontaneous speech and opinion expression. The majority of participants reported improvements in both verbal and nonverbal communication skills. The research highlights the importance of developing "Meeting Competency," which encompasses Willingness to Communicate, discourse integration, nonverbal communication, and shared leadership. By providing students with practical experience in meeting management and discussion facilitation, the Meeting-Style Classroom approach shows promise in preparing learners for effective communication in professional English-speaking environments. This study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on innovative pedagogical methods for enhancing English communication skills in higher education, particularly in contexts where English is not the primary language of instruction.

*Keywords:* Meeting-Style Classroom, meeting competency, communication skills, Willingness to Communicate, discourse integration, shared leadership

### Introduction

Effective English communication skills are essential for success in globalized business and academic settings where English often serves as the lingua franca. In Japan, traditional language education has focused on language proficiency, with an emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and the four key skills. Despite several educational reforms, such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's (MEXT) English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization introduced in 2014 (MEXT, 2014), traditional approaches remain insufficient in equipping students with practical communication skills required for active participation in real-world English discussions. Many students and professionals still continue to struggle with active participation in meetings.

In various EFL contexts, students recognize the importance of English communication and understand its value for their learning and future opportunities; however, despite their linguistic competence, many remain hesitant to actively participate in discussions. For example, a study

conducted in Indonesia found that although many students recognized the importance of communicating in English and understood the value of English for their learning and future opportunities, they were still very hesitant to speak during discussions (Rihardini et al., 2021). Japanese professionals often struggle with active participation in meetings due to a lack of experience in interactive and spontaneous communication despite their high English proficiency test scores (Sakimoto & Saito, 2019). This indicates that active discussion participation involves more than linguistic competence and emphasizes the need for improving “meeting competency” to effectively contribute to discussions and decision-making.

To address these challenges, pedagogical methods have been developed. The “Meeting-Style Classroom,” drawing inspiration from the “Student Leader Method” (Wade, 2009), has been introduced in this study to better address the communication challenges students face. The “Student Leader Method” focuses on improving communication skills in EFL classes by giving students leadership roles in classroom discussions. Building on this concept, the Meeting-Style Classroom further develops the idea by integrating real-life meeting scenarios, offering greater flexibility in the course structure. In this approach, students take on roles such as chairperson, timekeeper, minute taker, as well as other essential roles needed for effective meeting management. By engaging in these scenarios, students not only improve their English language proficiency but also develop essential meeting skills, or “meeting competency,” including leadership, time management, and decision-making, as well as skills such as making timely utterances, encouraging others to contribute, sharing opinions, deepening ideas through collaboration, and fostering teamwork—all of which are crucial for professional success.

While the Student Leader Method limits the instructor’s involvement mainly to an advisory role, the Meeting-Style Classroom offers a more balanced model, allowing students to lead while receiving expert input from teachers. Despite its potential, there is still a need for empirical research to assess the effectiveness of this approach in enhancing both language and communication skills, particularly for learners who often face challenges with spontaneous speech and leadership in discussions.

This study aims to address the existing gap by examining the effectiveness of the Meeting-Style Classroom approach in improving students’ English communication skills and Meeting competency. The study focuses on the following research questions:

How do students perceive the development of their communication and meeting competency (e.g., timely utterance of their ideas, leadership, time management, verbal feedback) after engaging in the Meeting-Style Classroom?

How did collaborations influence the development of communication and Meeting Competency after engaging in the Meeting-Style Classroom?

What challenges did students continue to face in conducting and participating in the meeting, and how can these be addressed?

How Meeting Competency is related for students’ active participation in discussions, as revealed by this study?

Through this investigation, this study hopes to provide insights into how experiential learning approaches, the Meeting-Style Classroom, can better prepare students for professional communication in English.

## Literature Review

English learners often face challenges in actively participating in meetings with English speakers, despite their language proficiency. A survey by Japan IBM revealed that, although Japanese IBM employees score higher on English proficiency tests compared to their Chinese counterparts, they feel less proficient in practical English communication skills (Sakimoto & Saito, 2019). The study used a survey to assess perceived abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing for complex tasks, revealing that Japanese employees feel they have lower capabilities primarily due to less frequent use of English in their work environment. In particular, 48% of Japanese employees surveyed preferred pre-prepared questions or avoided discussions. This suggests that active participation in discussions requires more than just language proficiency; it involves a comprehensive set of skills that encompass not only verbal and nonverbal behaviors but also the ability to engage meaningfully in discussions. This set of skills can be conceptualized as “Meeting Competency,” which will be discussed further in the following section.

To enhance learner engagement, responsibility, and practical communication skills, Wade (2009) advocated for a student-centered approach, the “Student Leader Method”, using a business meeting setting where students take turns acting as chairpersons with minimal instructor intervention (see also Ward et al., 2008). The teachers’ role is to offer constructive feedback post-session. The method emphasizes real-world application, encouraging students to lead discussions and manage classroom activities, thereby improving their English proficiency in a practical and interactive manner. However, the Student Leader Method may not be entirely appropriate for university classes as it limits the instructor’s role to mainly giving advice. To address this, we propose the “Meeting-Style Classroom” approach where students lead the class in a meeting format, while teachers also provide necessary guidance or specialized lectures during the sessions. The Meeting-Style Classroom approach allows students to take charge and develop leadership skills, while also benefiting from the teacher’s expertise. The Meeting-Style Classroom is adaptable to various university courses, offering a balanced approach that combines student autonomy with appropriate experts’ guidance.

## Meeting Competency

Meeting Competency requires not only having Communicative Competence (Bachman, 1990; Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980) but we propose the following four elements to use effectively. The first element is Willingness to Communicate (WTC) (MacIntyre et al., 1998). WTC is influenced by various factors, including learner’s perceived communicative competence, anxiety, and motivation. Anxiety, especially in language learners, is often triggered by fear of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated, which can inhibit students from initiating speech (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Rihardini et al., 2021). The combination of perceived competence and low anxiety is a significant predictor of WTC (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004). In other words, the higher the perceived competence and the lower the anxiety, the higher the WTC. Learners with higher WTC are more likely to engage in L2 communication inside and outside the classroom (Yashima et al., 2014). Classroom environments that induce positive experiences for learners have a direct impact on higher perceived competence and lower anxiety (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Factors influencing positive classroom environments for learners include supportive teachers, students who share the sense of cohesiveness and attachment to group members (Peng & Woodrow 2010; Wen & Clément 2003). However, some studies revealed that WTC is a dynamic, context-dependent phenomenon that fluctuates based on interpersonal and task-related factors in a specific situation (Kang, 2005; Toyoda & Yashima, 2021), individual characteristics, classroom environment, and linguistic factors (Cao, 2014). Hence, the study of

WTC provides an in-depth analysis of speaker's willingness, but if it does not translate into actual communication behavior in group conversations and discussions, success in meetings cannot be achieved.

The second element is discourse integration (DI), which encompasses the ability to integrate one's communication behavior naturally and appropriately into the flow of group conversation after having the WTC. The most prominent expression of communication behavior often occurs through verbal forms, namely utterances. There are two types of utterances in meetings: one is when a person is prompted by a chairperson or another third party, and the other is an utterance that occurs naturally in the flow of group conversation without being prompted by them. In particular, the latter is challenging for many L2 speakers, as demonstrated by the cases of Indonesian students and the Japanese company workers mentioned earlier. We argue that DI cannot be acquired simply by learning interruption phrases, as is done in conventional 'English for Meetings' textbooks, but involves developing a sense of timing, understanding the nuances of turn-taking in group conversations, and being able to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse without disrupting its flow. Such ability to adjust timing and participate naturally and appropriately in discussions extends beyond verbal utterances and is influenced by nonverbal communication behaviors as well, which will be discussed next.

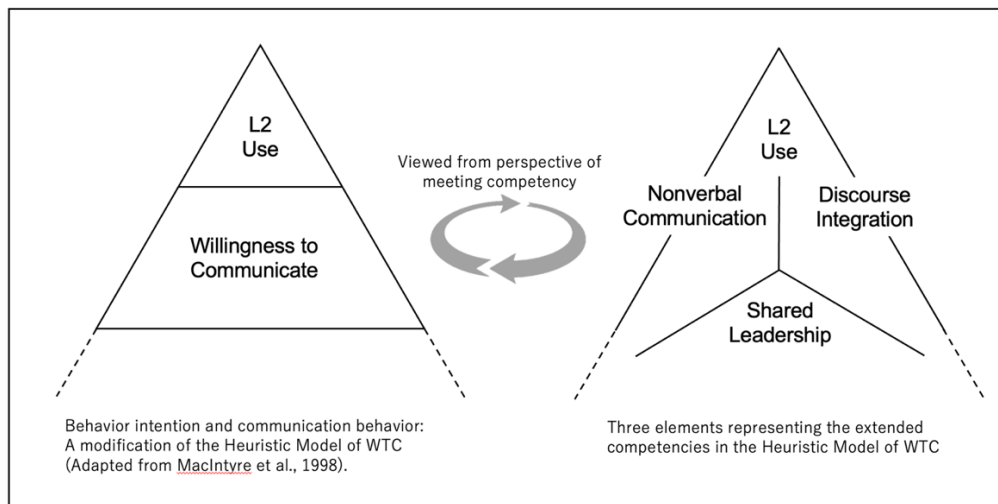
The third element is nonverbal communication. In meetings, participants use body language, such as raising a hand to signal a desire to speak or pointing to indicate someone's turn, to communicate. They may also use tone of voice or facial expressions to convey their intentions (Peleckis et al., 2015; Wiemann & Knapp, 1975). These nonverbal cues are important aspects of communication that convey meanings in human interactions (Knapp et al., 2014) and differ across cultures (Anderson, 1999; Matsumoto, 2006). Therefore, when L1 speakers use an L2 within a cultural context different from their own, they must learn the nonverbal communication styles specific to the cultural background of that L2. In addition to these well-known nonverbal cues, physical and spatial environments can also be considered nonverbal communication, affecting human interactions (Anderson, 1999; Knapp et al., 2014). In the context of meetings, factors such as how tables are arranged, atmosphere in which the meeting is conducted, or even the design and sound of the presentation slides used during the meeting possibly affect the performance of the participants.

The fourth element is shared leadership. Participants must demonstrate leadership to facilitate the smooth running of meetings within the limited time. This is not the leadership in the conventional sense, where one or a few leaders guide the group vertically, but rather what can be described as shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003), where each person in a team or organization takes on responsibilities, facilitates collaboration, and helps with operations, problem-solving, and decision-making. Research has shown that this shared leadership encourages more collaboration during team tasks and influences the direction, motivation, and support among team members (Carson et al., 2007; Clark, 2008; Wang et al., 2014). When conducting a meeting led by L2 learners, additional support beyond what is typically needed in L1 meetings plays a particularly important role for the success of the meeting. This includes creating an atmosphere where participants feel comfortable speaking, offering help when someone struggles to convey, and patiently waiting for speakers who take more time to express themselves, compared to when speaking in their L1. These behaviors may contribute to the factors influencing WTC, as previously outlined by Peng and Woodrow (2010).

Meeting Competency can be explained through an extension of the Heuristic Model of Variables Influencing Willingness to Communicate (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547), which visualizes the relationship between WTC and L2 Use. While the Heuristic Model highlights the progression from WTC to actual L2 Use, it does not fully capture the broader skills needed

for effective participation in meetings where learners use their L2. Therefore, we propose incorporating three additional elements—Nonverbal Communication, shared leadership, and discourse integration—into the model to better represent Meeting Competency. When the Heuristic Model is viewed from a different angle, specifically through the lens of Meeting Competency, these three elements emerge as crucial components that enhance the framework and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the skills needed for effective communication in meetings. These elements complement the foundational relationship between WTC and L2 Use, providing a more holistic view of the competencies needed for successful participation. Figure 1 illustrates this extended model of Meeting Competency, showing how the original Heuristic Model can be expanded to include these critical components for effective communication.

**Figure 1. Framework of Meeting Competency**



## Methods

The primary objective of this study was to determine whether simulating professional meetings could help cultivate the skills necessary for active participation in discussions. The Meeting-Style Classroom approach was introduced across three different courses at three universities in Japan, referred to as Course A, Course B, and Course C. Course A was a general English course, Course B focused on Business English, and Course C was not an English language course but rather a Liberal Arts Seminar, where students from various disciplines gathered to engage in discussions in English. Each course consisted of 90-minute sessions conducted once a week over a period of 15 weeks. The details of each course are summarized in Table 1. A total of 23 students participated in a post-course survey. The survey aimed to assess how students perceived their improvements in their communication and meeting-related skills. Following the survey, we analyzed the results to evaluate the participants’ self-reported skill development throughout the courses.

**Table 1: Overview of Courses Implementing the Meeting-Style Classroom Approach**

	Course A	Course B	Course C
Course Description	General English	Business English 1 & 2	Liberal Arts Seminar



Main objectives	To hone facilitation, discussion and presentation skills.	To promote themselves in English to professionals in your field.	To expand their knowledge in their area of interest and create original content to share.
Number of students enrolled	7	16	15
Number of survey participants	4	6	13
Course Format	Online (Zoom)	On-site	Mostly on-site

## Meeting-Style Classroom

### Format of the Meeting-Style Classroom

The Meeting-Style Classroom (See Kondo, 2024) is designed to transfer the entire initiative in the class from the teachers to students, including the facilitator's role, instead of the teachers prompting them to work in groups. By enabling students to take on the role of giving cues and guiding the class, the Meeting-Style Classroom aims to authentically nurture students' leadership skills while also fostering their ability to take proactive roles in discussions and decision-making. Teachers participate in the meetings as "advisors" or "experts", providing occasional advice and feedback. Teachers may also actively join the discussion or offer lectures when necessary, but the primary leadership always remains with the students.

Unlike traditional student-led classrooms, where the teacher often gives initial prompts or instructions, the Meeting-Style Classroom shifts the responsibility entirely to the students, encouraging them to independently organize and manage their meetings. While inspired by the Student Leader Method (Wade, 2009), which "uses a business meeting model in which students take turns acting as group chair, and conduct the whole lesson with minimal instructor involvement but with the instructor generally giving constructive feedback after the session" (Ward et al., 2009), the Meeting-Style Classroom offers greater flexibility. In most cases, teachers remain in the background, allowing students to lead and manage the class. However, teachers can occasionally intervene as experts to offer targeted advice, feedback, or even lectures, while still ensuring that students maintain full responsibility for meeting management. This balance between minimal intervention and strategic guidance helps students develop both collaborative responsibility and shared leadership. The adaptable nature of the Meeting-Style Classroom makes it suitable for a wide range of educational contexts, from active learning to lecture-based settings, where students can still take the lead in driving the session forward.

### Roles and Structure in the Meeting-Style Classroom

The Meeting-Style Classroom is structured to simulate a real-world business meeting, allowing students to take on various roles necessary for conducting an effective session. Each meeting follows a pre-designed agenda along with a clear timetable. The following roles are typically assigned to facilitate the meeting:

- Chairperson: Leads the meeting, ensures discussions stay on track, and facilitates the flow of conversation according to the agenda.

- Timekeeper: Manages time, ensuring that each agenda item is covered within the designated timeframe.
- Minute Taker: Records key points, decisions, and provides a summary of the discussion for later review, ensuring that all important aspects of the meeting are captured.
- Other roles: Depending on the needs of the session, additional roles may be assigned. These could include an IT Assistant, who manages any technical or audiovisual needs. In one case, a student proposed a DJ role, where they selected background music to set the mood for each activity in the meeting. Though unique, such a role could add creativity and enhance the engagement and atmosphere of the session.

### **Agenda and Pre-Meeting Preparation**

A crucial element of the Meeting-Style Classroom is the agenda, distributed to participants before each meeting. The agenda outlines the meeting's goals, key discussion points, and provides necessary guidance, including a timetable. An example of the agenda is shown in Figure 2. While teachers typically create and distribute the agenda, given their role in shaping the course's educational objectives and framework, it can be advantageous to let students design their own agendas as the course progresses. This shift, especially toward the end of the course, fosters greater ownership and leadership among students.

### **Figure 2. Example of the Agenda**

## Session 6 (September 19, 2024), AGENDA

### Roles

Chair: Erika, Timekeeper: Ken

### Absentees

XX

### Goals

- Use action verbs to summarize your background and skills.
- Describe your personality using adjectives.
- Learn how to promote yourself in 30 seconds.

### Time table

Time (min.)	Tasks	Directions	Notes
09:00 09:15 (15)	Preparation	<p>To all: Prepare for class. Start your computer. Check the classroom setting.</p> <p>To Chair:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start the class.</li> <li>• Take attendance.</li> <li>• Post ice-breaker questions.</li> </ul> </p> <p>To all:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enjoy talking with your group members.</li> </ul> </p>	English only
09:15 09:25 (10)	Review	<p>Review the previous class.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review the key learnings.</li> <li>• Highlight interesting/important points in your classmates' portfolios.</li> </ul> <p>To Chair:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present some of your classmates' portfolios and review the in-class activity from the previous class.</li> <li>• Handover to the teacher when you have finished.</li> </ul> </p>	English and/or Japanese
09:25 09:55 (30)	Presentation: Your background and personality	<p>To Chair:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be a moderator for this presentation session.</li> <li>• Invite questions and comments.</li> </ul> </p> <p>To all:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share your assignment.</li> <li>• Exchange questions and comments.</li> <li>• Be an active listener!</li> </ul> </p> <p>Handover to the teacher when you have finished. "Yukie, can I handover to you?"</p>	English Comments may be in Japanese.
09:55 10:20 (25)	Explaining your background and skills	Teacher will deliver a workshop about "30-second self-promotion".	
10:20 10:30 (10)	Closing	<p>To Chair:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summarize today's class.</li> <li>• Invite the timekeeper's remarks.</li> <li>• Decide next week's roles.</li> <li>• Conclude the class</li> </ul> </p>	

This pre-meeting preparation mirrors real-world business practices, where agendas are used to organize and guide productive meetings. Students are expected to prepare for their specific roles, such as chairperson or timekeeper, by researching the topics on the agenda and thinking about how they can contribute to the meeting. This preparation fosters self-directed learning, ensures that the meeting runs smoothly, and helps cultivate a more focused and productive environment.

## Results

The questions posed to participants were broadly divided into four categories: 1. skills related to communication during meetings, 2. overall verbal and nonverbal communication skills, 3. attitudes towards engaging in meetings, and 4. the influence of the Meeting-Style Classroom—both in terms of how others influenced the participant and how the participant influenced others. Additionally, participants were asked about other non-communication skills they felt had improved through the course.

### Q1. Skills related to discourse integration during meetings

This section of the survey focused on participants' skills related to communication during meetings. Six specific questions were asked to assess various aspects of their communication abilities, with responses given on a five-point scale: Yes, Mostly yes, Neutral, Mostly no, and No. The six questions were:

- Q. 1-1. Can you speak when prompted?
- Q. 1-2. Can you speak without being prompted?
- Q. 1-3. Can you join conversations smoothly?
- Q. 1-4. Can you effectively express your opinions?
- Q. 1-5. Can you respond verbally to others?
- Q. 1-6. Can you respond nonverbally to others (e.g., using gestures)?

Results are shown in Figure 3.

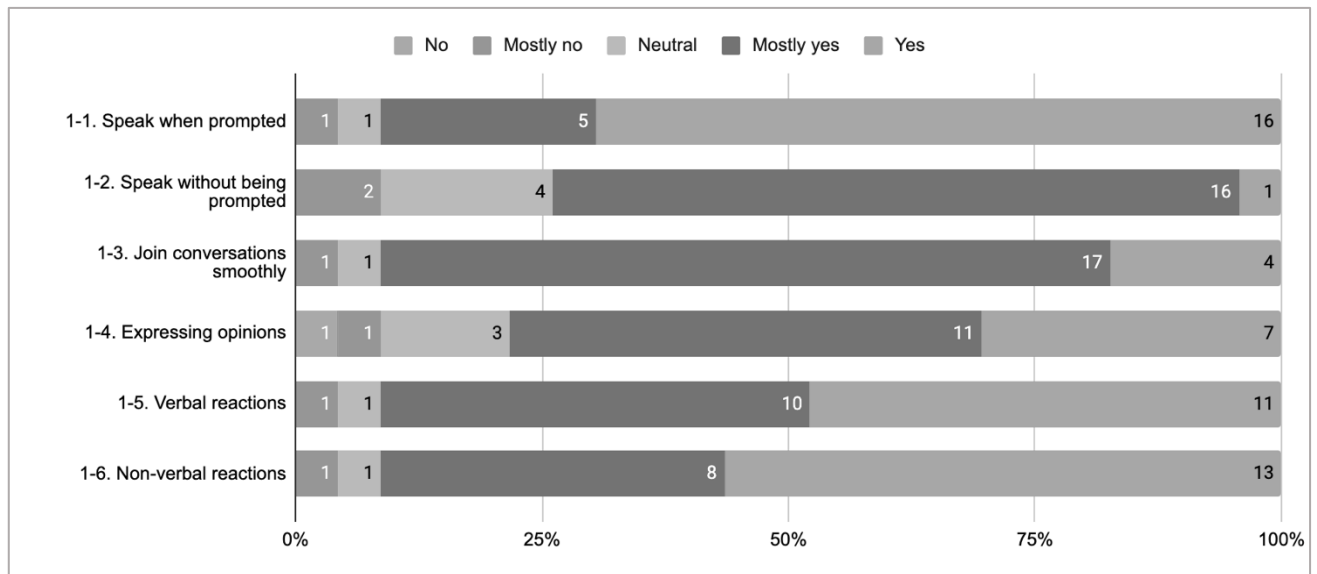
For speaking when prompted (Q. 1-1), the majority of participants (16) answered Yes, with another 5 selecting Mostly yes, reflecting high confidence in responding when asked. Similarly, most participants (17) felt comfortable joining conversations smoothly (Q. 1-3), with only 2 participants expressing some difficulty in this area, selecting Mostly no or Neutral.

However, when asked about speaking without being prompted (Q. 1-2), the responses were more diverse. While 16 participants answered Mostly yes, only 1 responded Yes, highlighting that full confidence in unprompted speaking was rare. Additionally, 4 participants selected Neutral, and 2 responded with Mostly no, suggesting that unprompted speaking remains a challenge for some. A similar trend was observed for expressing opinions (Q. 1-4), where 11 participants answered Mostly yes, and 7 responded Yes, but 5 felt neutral or struggled to express their views confidently.

Regarding reactions during meetings, both verbal (Q. 1-5) and nonverbal (Q. 1-6), the results were largely positive. A combined 21 participants felt confident in providing verbal reactions, selecting Yes or Mostly yes. Nonverbal reactions showed even greater confidence, with 13 participants selecting Yes and 8 choosing Mostly yes, indicating that participants felt comfortable using gestures or facial expressions to support communication, even when verbal exchanges were more challenging.

In summary, while participants showed high levels of confidence in responding when prompted and providing reactions, there were noticeable challenges in spontaneous speaking and expressing opinions. These findings suggest that while structured speaking scenarios are more comfortable for participants, unstructured or spontaneous speech may require further practice and support.

**Figure 3. Survey Results on Participants’ Communication Skills During Meetings**



**Q2. Overall communication skills**

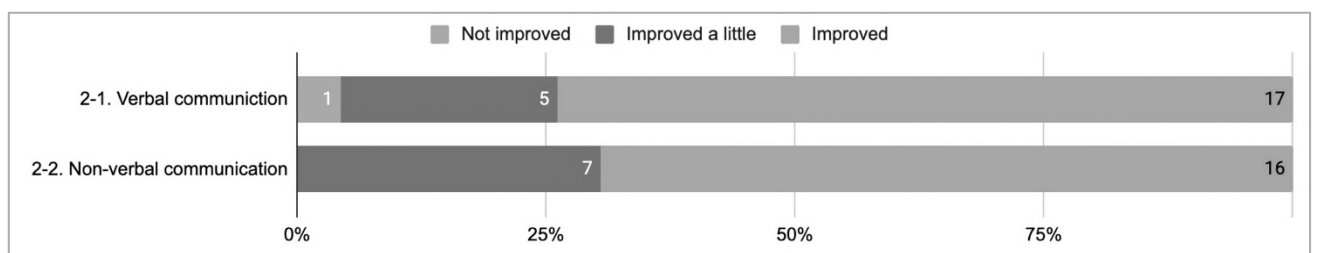
This section of the survey focused on changes in participants’ overall communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, over the 15-session course. Participants responded to two specific questions using a three-point scale: Not improved, Improved a little, and Improved. The questions were:

Q. 2-1. Through the meetings, do you think your English communication skills have improved?

Q. 2-2. Through the meetings, do you think your nonverbal communication skills have improved?

The results are shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Survey Results on the Change in Participants’ Overall Communication Skills (Verbal and Nonverbal)**



The results indicate that the majority of participants felt their communication skills during meetings improved. For verbal communication (Q. 2-1), 17 participants responded that their skills “Improved,” while 5 indicated they “Improved a little,” and only 1 participant felt their verbal skills had “Not improved.” In terms of nonverbal communication (Q. 2-2), 16 participants selected “Improved” and 7 chose “Improved a little.” Nonverbal communication here included reactions such as better eye contact, appropriate gestures, and nodding, all of which are crucial for demonstrating attentiveness and understanding in professional meetings. None of the participants felt that their nonverbal communication skills had not improved. These results suggest that most participants perceived notable gains in both verbal and nonverbal communication abilities.

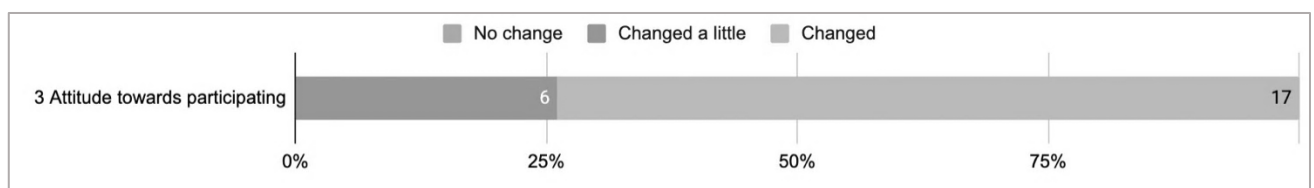
The following insights are based on the free responses from the participants who indicated that their verbal communication skills improved through meetings. Several participants highlighted that the increased opportunities to practice English in real-life discussion settings were refreshing and stimulating, offering experiences they had not encountered in other classes. The frequent participation in meetings, as well as assuming roles such as chairperson and timekeeper, helped them become more comfortable speaking English in front of others. They appreciated the challenge of responding to unpredictable questions and topics, which allowed them to think and speak more spontaneously. Some participants mentioned that this course fostered a more supportive environment, making it easier to speak without fear of mistakes and encouraging active participation. Additionally, the interaction with classmates, both in and out of class, provided a sense of community that lowered the barriers to speaking up. Through repeated practice, participants felt more confident expressing their thoughts clearly and responding to others, even when they didn't have the perfect vocabulary or grammar.

Participants who reported improved nonverbal communication skills noted an increased ability to express themselves through gestures, facial expressions, and vocal tone, even when they struggled to find the right words in English. Some highlighted their growing confidence in reacting during online meetings, such as nodding, smiling, and using tone to indicate engagement. Others mentioned that they became more aware of nonverbal cues, both in expressing their own ideas and understanding others, which enhanced their overall communication during meetings.

### Q3. Attitudes towards participating in meetings

This section of the survey focused on participants' attitudes towards engaging in meetings. Participants responded to the question "Q. 3. Have your attitudes towards participating in meetings changed compared to the first session of this course?" using a three-point scale: No change, Changed A little, and Changed. As illustrated in Figure 5, 17 participants indicated that their attitudes had "Changed," while 6 participants selected "Changed a little." Notably, no participants chose "No change," suggesting that all respondents experienced some improvement in their engagement with meetings.

**Figure 5. Survey Results on Attitude Towards Engaging in Meetings**



In the follow-up questions to Q. 3, participants cited various reasons for their improved attitudes towards engaging in meetings. One participant noted that facilitating discussions without a teacher fostered a sense of responsibility and lowered the barrier to speaking, creating a sense of group cohesiveness (Wen & Clément 2003). Others emphasized the value of practical communication experience, which they found lacking in other classes. As one participant said, "I seldom had chances to communicate in other classes, so practicing here was refreshing."

Participants also noted that repeated exposure to English discussions helped them overcome their fear of mistakes and speak more freely. The unpredictable nature of the discussions improved their ability to respond flexibly. One participant even expressed initial doubts about this new approach but eventually grew to enjoy the format. The program also fostered a sense of empowerment, with one participant stating, "By speaking up, instead of leaving things to

others, I realized that my words could move others and even change the world.” This mindset encouraged active engagement and responsibility.

In response to the follow-up question about how their attitudes changed, many participants shared that they became more proactive and engaged in class over time. Initially passive or unsure, they gradually took on more responsibility, contributing actively to discussions rather than relying on others. One participant noted that their mindset changed “from merely participating in the class to considering the management of the class with a broader perspective.” Others noted that preparing for class in advance helped them feel more confident and allowed them to contribute meaningfully. Over time, participants seemed to have found joy in receiving feedback and discussing with peers, which further motivated them to refine their participation. The supportive class environment also helped participants feel more comfortable expressing their ideas.

**Q4. The influence of the Meeting-Style Classroom —both in terms of how others influenced the participant and how the participant influenced others**

This section of the survey focused on the impact of the Meeting-Style Classroom —both in terms of how participants were influenced by others and how they influenced others. Participants responded using a three-point scale: No, Somewhat yes, and Yes. The questions were:

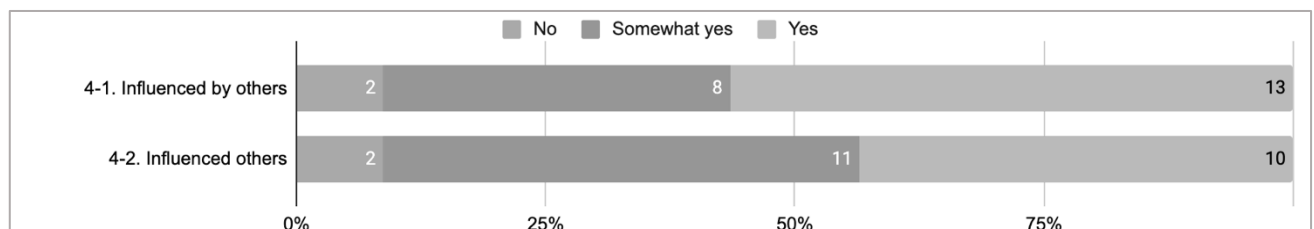
Q. 4-1. Do you think you were influenced by your classmates’ words and attitudes through meetings?

Q. 4-2. Do you think your words and attitudes during meetings influenced your classmates through meetings?

The results are shown in Figure 6.

For the influence by others (Q. 4-1), 13 participants responded “Yes,” 8 responded “Somewhat yes,” and 2 indicated “No,” showing that the majority felt influenced by their classmates through the course. For the participants’ influence on others (Q. 4-2), 10 participants responded “Yes”, 11 responded “Somewhat yes,” and 2 chose “No.” These results suggest that while most participants felt that they were both influenced by and had an influence on others, a smaller group felt they received or give no impact.

**Figure 6. Survey Results on the Influence of the Meeting-Style Classroom (Influencing and Being Influenced by Others)**



In response to the follow-up question for 4-1, “What words or attitudes from your classmates influenced you?”, participants shared that they were inspired by their peers’ positive attitudes and efforts to communicate in English, even when making mistakes. Watching others strive to communicate despite difficulties encouraged many participants to be more proactive and confident in their own participation. Supportive gestures, such as nodding and maintaining eye contact, as well as constructive verbal feedback, helped boost their confidence. Several participants mentioned being motivated by their classmates’ enthusiasm, active participation,

and willingness to take on challenges. Others highlighted how hearing diverse perspectives and observing fluent English speakers pushed them to improve their own skills. Overall, the positive and collaborative environment fostered a sense of focus and deeper engagement in discussions.

In response to the follow-up question for 4-2, “What words or attitudes of you do you think influenced others?”, participants reflected on various ways they felt they influenced their classmates. Many participants noted that their persistent efforts to communicate in English, despite difficulties, served as an inspiration to their peers. Nonverbal responses like nodding during presentations were seen as ways to show support and encourage the speaker: “I think by nodding while my classmates presented, I showed that I was engaged and they were being understood.” Some participants felt their active participation, such as answering questions or giving feedback after presentations, helped foster more engaging discussions. One participant specifically mentioned how speaking first in meetings helped break the ice. Additionally, several participants believed their positive attitudes, humor, and efforts to keep the conversation going helped create a more open and lively class atmosphere.

## Discussion

In this section, we address the Research Questions posed in this study, using the findings to explore how the Meeting-Style Classroom impacted students’ communication and meeting skills.

### **RQ 1: How do students perceive the development of their communication and meeting skills after engaging in the Meeting-Style Classroom?**

The findings from this study suggest that students generally perceive a significant improvement in their communication and meeting skills after engaging in the Meeting-Style Classroom. A majority of students reported improvements in both verbal and nonverbal communication skills, as well as specific meeting-related skills such as time management and feedback.

One of the most evident areas of improvement was their utterance or verbal communication. For example, Q. 1-1 (Can you speak when prompted?) and Q. 1-3 (Can you join conversations smoothly?) show that most students felt more confident in responding when asked and smoothly joining conversations, with 16 and 17 participants, respectively, responding positively. This suggests that the structured nature of the Meeting-Style Classroom, where a chairperson and other roles are appointed and the meeting progresses according to a pre-distributed agenda, helped promote student utterances. The agenda provided a clear structure and goals to achieve that allowed students to anticipate discussion points and feel more prepared to contribute, thereby enhancing their verbal communication skills in a practical, real-world context.

Another critical skill that students perceived improvement in was leadership. By taking on leadership roles in the meetings, such as chairing discussions or facilitating group conversations, participants gained firsthand experience in managing discussions and guiding their peers. While the opportunity to act as chairperson was limited due to the 15-session course, participants gradually realized that leadership is not confined to the chairperson alone. Instead, the Meeting-Style Classroom takes this further by promoting shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003), in which leadership is distributed among all participants, rather than concentrated in a single role.



Also, participants reported gains in feedback skills. As seen in the free responses, participants appreciated the opportunities to provide constructive feedback to their peers after presentations, as well as receiving feedback themselves. This process not only helped them improve their own communication skills but also contributed to a collaborative learning environment, where participants could learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses.

A comparison with alternative pedagogical methods highlights the unique strengths of the Meeting-Style Classroom. For instance, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Ellis, 2003) emphasizes practical task completion in real-world scenarios but often lacks the importance of structured leadership training. Likewise, Flipped Classroom approaches promote preparatory learning outside class and interactive activities during sessions, yet they do not prioritize strategies to foster spontaneous communication. In contrast, the Meeting-Style Classroom offers a distinctive blend of role-based structure and real-time interaction, creating a comprehensive framework for developing both leadership and communication competencies.

In summary, participants felt that their participation in the Meeting-Style Classroom enhanced a range of communication and meeting skills. The structured yet interactive nature of the classroom provided them with repeated opportunities to practice speaking, taking leadership, managing time, and exchanging feedback, all of which are crucial in real-world professional settings.

### **RQ 2: How did collaborations influence the development of communication and meeting skills after engaging in the Meeting-Style Classroom?**

Collaboration played a crucial role in the development of participants' communication and meeting skills in the Meeting-Style Classroom. The results show that through working closely with peers, participants became more comfortable with both verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as meeting-related tasks like providing feedback, leading discussions, and time management.

Additionally, the concept of shared leadership was clearly demonstrated. While the chairperson had a formal leadership role, all participants contributed to the success of the meetings by managing time, providing feedback, and encouraging participation. In the free responses to Q. 4-1 (Do you think you were influenced by your classmates?) and Q. 4-2 (Do you think your words and attitudes influenced others?), participants frequently noted how they supported each other, whether by acknowledging their peers' efforts or encouraging them to speak up. This recognition of one another's contributions and hard work helped create a collaborative atmosphere and a sense of cohesiveness where participants felt motivated to participate actively. This supports Peng and Woodrow (2010) and Wen and Clement (2003). The distributed responsibility fostered a deeper understanding of leadership and collaboration, where participants worked together to ensure the meeting's success.

This collaborative environment also played a significant role in developing discourse integration. By observing and supporting each other's attempts to contribute to discussions, students were able to learn from their peers' successes and challenges in naturally integrating their utterances into the conversation flow.

### **RQ 3: What challenges did students continue to face in conducting and participating in the meeting, and how can these be addressed?**

Despite the positive outcomes of the Meeting-Style Classroom, students continued to face challenges related to active participation, such as spontaneous speech and expressing opinions. As shown in Q. 1-2 (Can you speak without being prompted?) and Q. 1-4 (Can you effectively

express your opinions?), many participants struggled with unprompted participation and confidently presenting their thoughts. This hesitation likely stemmed from a lack of confidence in unstructured communication and/or interrupting or contradicting others in discussions, as observed in Yashima's studies (2002; 2004).

These challenges are particularly relevant to the concept of discourse integration. The ability to seamlessly integrate one's utterances into the flow of conversation without prompting is a key aspect of effective meeting participation, and the results suggest that this remains an area of difficulty for many students.

The challenges observed in spontaneous speech can also be linked to the concept of WTC in second language learning (MacIntyre et al., 1998). WTC is influenced by various factors, including learners' perceived communicative competence, anxiety, and motivation. In this study, it is likely that while students felt more competent in structured roles, their anxiety remained high when faced with situations that required spontaneous contributions. This is consistent with Peng and Woodrow's (2010) findings, where anxiety—especially among language learners—is triggered by fear of making mistakes or negative evaluation, inhibiting students from initiating speech.

To address these challenges, it is crucial to create a low-anxiety environment where students feel comfortable making spontaneous contributions. One possible intervention is to gradually reduce the structure of the meeting roles over time, allowing students to transition from highly structured to more open-ended discussions. Another approach could be to integrate specific training focused on building WTC, such as reflective exercises where students assess their own willingness to engage in group conversations and explore the reasons behind their hesitation.

#### **RQ 4: How meeting competency is related for students to actively communicate and participate in discussions, as revealed by this study?**

The findings from this study demonstrate that meeting competency is crucial for fostering active communication and participation in the Meeting-Style Classroom. According to the framework discussed earlier, four key elements are required: WTC, verbal communication, in particular the ability to integrate utterances naturally, nonverbal communication, and shared leadership. Each of these elements was observed in the students' experiences throughout the course.

##### **Element 1: Willingness to Communicate (WTC)**

WTC was a critical factor in determining how actively students engaged in unprompted speech and spontaneous contributions. As seen in Q. 1-2 (Can you speak without being prompted?), many students hesitated to initiate speech, indicating that their WTC was still developing. Although structured roles like chairperson helped guide them, gradually fostering WTC through more open-ended, less scripted discussions is essential for creating a more dynamic participation environment.

##### **Element 2: Discourse integration (DI)**

Discourse integration, which refers to the ability to naturally incorporate one's utterances into the flow of group conversation, was challenging for students. As the study revealed, students were relatively comfortable responding when prompted but were struggled with unprompted contributions. This challenge highlights the importance of building this competency, not merely through scripted language practice, but through authentic, real-time opportunities for students to engage in group discussions without relying on external prompts. Providing more

opportunities to engage in spontaneous conversation within unstructured dialogues is essential for improving this competency.

### **Element 3: Nonverbal communication**

Nonverbal communication played a significant role in facilitating smoother interactions. Many participants, as reflected in Q. 1-6 (Can you respond nonverbally?), became more confident in using gestures, facial expressions, and body language to show engagement and signal their intentions. These reactions and responses are vital in meetings when students struggle with verbal communication, helping bridge gaps in understanding while supporting smoother group dynamics. Strengthening nonverbal communication can also support students in overcoming challenges related to joining conversations naturally and speaking up without being prompted. By honing these skills, students may find it easier to engage in discussions more spontaneously, even when they are not directly invited to contribute. Nonverbal communication also varies across cultures (e.g., Matsumoto, 2006). Cultural awareness of differences in nonverbal behaviors, such as the interpretation of eye contact or gestures, can be crucial for effective communication in multicultural settings. Incorporating such knowledge into Meeting-Style Classroom practices enhance students' readiness for global professional environments.

In this context, nonverbal communication extends beyond gestures and body language to include subtle yet powerful actions, such as rearranging chairs or desks to create a more conducive setting for conversation. It also involves adjusting the environment or introducing small elements, such as the colors used in slideshows or background music, that energize the day's session and foster a more inviting atmosphere for participation. This kind of silent communication and attentiveness will help build a space where everyone feels encouraged to engage actively, creating a supportive meeting environment.

In online meetings, the simple act of turning the camera on or off can itself serve as a powerful nonverbal gesture that conveys one's willingness to engage. Participants made various efforts to enhance their presence in online settings, such as turning on their cameras and using facial expressions like smiling or nodding during peers' presentations to demonstrate attentiveness. This illustrates that participants were mindful to create a supportive environment even in a virtual context by themselves. Considering that strategies for fostering effective nonverbal communication vary between face-to-face and online settings, further research should explore these contextual differences to optimize communication in both environments.

Crucially, this aspect of nonverbal communication is not limited to teachers. One of the key features of the Meeting-Style Classroom is that students themselves take on the responsibility of shaping the meeting environment and setting the tone for the discussion. By proactively managing both the physical and interpersonal dynamics of the meeting, students act as the driving force behind the success of each session. This form of nonverbal communication, where students take ownership of facilitating the environment, contributes to the unique experience of the Meeting-Style Classroom and promotes active participation from all members.

### **Element 4: Shared leadership**

Shared leadership was essential in managing the flow of meetings and encouraging participation from all members. As the shared leadership model suggests, this competency goes beyond the formal role of a single leader. Students learned to share leadership responsibilities, from managing time and ensuring all agenda items were covered, to facilitating engagement among their peers.

In the Meeting-Style Classroom, the first step of the leadership is transferring control of the class from the teacher to the student leader, who assumes the role of chairperson. The second step involves assigning additional roles, such as timekeeper or minute-taker, ensuring that multiple students take on different responsibilities. This process makes students aware that leadership is not confined to the chairperson but is distributed across several roles. The third step encourages all participants, regardless of assigned roles, to contribute to the meeting. Even when students do not hold a formal position, they are expected to step in, sometimes guiding the discussion or supporting the leader to ensure the success of the meeting. Leadership is understood as a collective effort, not something achieved by a single charismatic figure or the most vocal person, but by the contributions of everyone involved. The survey results indicated that students developed leadership when acting as chairperson, and several comments in the survey suggested that they contributed to supporting others in fulfilling their roles, fostering a more collaborative environment.

The final step, as students transition from the classroom to the professional world, is applying this understanding of shared leadership to real-life settings. Even if they do not hold formal leadership positions, such as a “chairperson,” they can leverage their strengths to contribute effectively in various types of meetings, whether it is friends planning a trip, a company meeting, or other collaborative projects. By working together and utilizing their individual skills, students can become active, engaged members of any discussion or team, regardless of their official role.

In a future study, it would be worthwhile to investigate the relationship between leadership maturity and participation in discussions. Although many Japanese students may not see themselves as “leader types,” deepening their understanding of shared leadership could help them recognize various leadership roles that suit their personality, thereby enhancing their engagement in discussions.

### **Summary of the Meeting competency**

In conclusion, the development of these four elements—Willingness to Communicate, discourse integration, nonverbal communication, and shared leadership—is key to helping students develop overall meeting competency. This comprehensive competency ensures that students can navigate the complexities of group communication, contributing meaningfully to the overall success of meetings. Future instructional approaches should continue to emphasize these areas to better prepare students for real-world communication scenarios.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of the Meeting-Style Classroom approach; however, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the reliance on self-reported data may not fully capture the nuanced development of students’ communication skills. Future research could benefit from incorporating triangulation methods, such as objective evaluations of recorded meetings and linguistic analysis of student utterances, to provide a more comprehensive assessment of skill development.

While this study provides a snapshot of students’ perceptions immediately after the course, it does not address the long-term impact of the Meeting-Style Classroom approach. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (1984) emphasizes the importance of a cycle of learning, where students gain concrete experiences, reflect on their performance, and actively apply their insights to new contexts. This framework suggests that the skills developed in the Meeting-

Style Classroom could maintain long-term value in professional settings. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to track students' progress over time, including follow-up assessments after graduation to evaluate how the skills developed through this approach transfer to real-world professional settings. Additionally, comparative studies between the Meeting-Style Classroom and other pedagogical approaches could offer valuable insights into its relative effectiveness in developing meeting competency and communication skills.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the Meeting-Style Classroom is an effective pedagogical approach for enhancing English communication skills and meeting competency among Japanese university students. By simulating a real-world meeting and assigning students roles used in professional settings, the approach provides practical experience that goes beyond traditional language instruction. The findings indicate that while students became more confident in structured speaking situations and were adept at providing verbal and nonverbal feedback, they continued to face challenges in spontaneous speech and unprompted participation. This emphasizes the importance of focusing not only on language proficiency but also on the key elements that constitute meeting competency—Willingness to Communicate, discourse integration, nonverbal communication, and shared leadership—to develop comprehensive communication skills.

The collaborative environment fostered by the Meeting-Style Classroom played a significant role in students' skill development. Shared leadership allowed students to support each other, promoting a deeper understanding of teamwork and collective responsibility. Despite persistent challenges in spontaneous communication, the overall positive outcomes suggest that with continued practice and targeted interventions, such as creating low-anxiety environments, students can further improve their ability to actively participate in discussions.

The implications of this study extend beyond language education. The Meeting-Style Classroom not only enhances linguistic skills but also equips students with crucial soft skills, such as leadership, decision-making, and time management, that are transferable to their future careers. By balancing student autonomy with expert guidance, this approach fosters both independence and structured learning, creating a comprehensive educational experience.

In conclusion, the Meeting-Style Classroom offers a promising framework for preparing students for the communication demands of global professional environments. By addressing both the linguistic and interpersonal aspects of effective communication, and by focusing on the essential elements that make up meeting competency, this approach not only enhances language skills but also equips learners with the necessary competency to contribute meaningfully in meetings. Future research should explore long-term impacts and consider integrating strategies to overcome the challenges identified, thereby refining the approach for broader application in diverse educational contexts.

## Notes

Part of the content of this paper is based on what the authors presented (Kondo & Fujimura, 2024) at AILA 2024.

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## Using ChatGPT to Learn Vocabulary in Context – The Case of In-Service Teachers Learning Vietnamese

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### Abstract

In our research, we aim to refine the use of ChatGPT for independent language learning through action research and a cyclical design that involves continuous feedback and improvement. In the first cycle, five learners (in-service non-Vietnamese teachers at RMIT University Vietnam) studied a set of prompts pre-designed by the researchers. They experimented with a 30-minute Vietnamese-learning chatting session with ChatGPT about a topic of their choice. The provided set included prompts asking ChatGPT to generate topic-specific vocabulary, reading passages, word definitions, and language tests. After the chat sessions, the researchers gathered learners' reflections about what they had learned and aimed to evaluate the student's learning through the chat session. Their responses were coded and analysed thematically to identify their attitudes towards using the tool. The primary results suggested that the prompts could be used for vocabulary-in-context learning and have potential for use in language teaching. However, some limitations of ChatGPT have been observed, shedding light on future research on using ChatGPT and similar tools for independent language learning.

*Keywords:* ChatGPT, vocabulary, in-service teachers, Vietnamese

### Introduction

The rapid emergence of digital solutions applicable to the language learning field calls for validation and deeper consideration of their utility. Since the development of personal computers and later smartphones, new technologies have assisted language learning – both as additional and leading learning platforms. With the emergence of AI, the dynamics between the learners and applied technologies have changed, positioning the technology as a virtual tutor rather than an application or interactive service based on pre-defined material (Kohnke et al., 2023). In this context, learning language focuses on the learner's choice of what he wants to learn, personalised needs and vocabulary in context. The worldwide social and cultural disruption related to the emergence of ChatGPT raises questions about the utilitarian character of this language model-based software. Since its emergence in 2022, ChatGPT has gained significant attention as a tool with great potential to enhance effectiveness in various fields. Observing the possibilities of open-access language learning technologies, we acknowledge that ChatGPT can function as a virtual assistant to language learners, especially in languages without strong representation in digital learning applications, such as Vietnamese.

Our pilot research seeks to confirm ChatGPT's values in language learning, potentially paving the way for more organised and systematic use of this tool in the classroom and individual practice. The applied methodology is interdisciplinary action research described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2004), which uses solutions from media studies, language studies, ethnography, and suitable theories related to the critical analysis of learning and teaching design. Noticing that AI can occasionally hallucinate (making up information), which is often triggered by, among others, the use of translanguaging, unclear instructions, or lack of clear



learning prompts, we set out to design and trial several prompts that aim to tackle this issue. In this article, we showcase the results of three research tasks we conducted in the first cycle of our research process – the prompts creation, the tests with the participants (Vietnamese language learners at beginner and intermediate levels of proficiency), and the results of the post-exercise interviews. The prompts focused on vocabulary-in-context exercises popularly used in language teaching (i.e., thematic readings and short tests). The last phase included the analysis of the results, comparing users' experiences. It is expected that by working out how ChatGPT can be used as a language-learning assistant, we can create a new learning-on-demand model which can be successfully applied to Vietnamese language teaching. This paper emphasises the importance of vocabulary acquisition in language learning and the learner's autonomous role in creating meaningful learning content.

Observing the potential of open-access language learning technologies, we acknowledge that ChatGPT can function as a virtual assistant to language learners, especially in languages that have no strong representation in digital learning applications, such as Vietnamese. ChatGPT expands the current technology-driven language-learning repertoire by providing natural feedback to any input queries, functioning both as a tutor and a test provider. We argue for the use of ChatGPT as an in-demand language learning tool for beginning language learners, especially learners of languages with low representation, such as Vietnamese. ChatGPT expands the current technology-driven language-learning repertoire by providing natural feedback to any input queries, functioning both as a tutor and a test provider.

The study reported in this extended abstract is part of a bigger, interdisciplinary research project funded by RMIT Vietnam to explore the impact of ChatGPT on several aspects of academic life project 2AI: The Future of Academic Integrity and Ethics in the Context of Machine Learning Algorithms, which was conducted at RMIT Vietnam in 2023/2024.

## Literature Review

In the field of language teaching, several authors have envisioned ChatGPT's potential (e.g., Barriot, 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023), suggesting how such a tool could be used to benefit language learners. With its unique ability to generate answers to any queries in real-time and provide natural-sounding texts in several languages, ChatGPT can provide explanations of vocabulary, create texts, and tailor its language output according to users' demands. Therefore, it can bring many new affordances to language learning. It can act as an assistant or language tutor, helping provide explanations and feedback to students (Song & Song, 2023; Xiao & Zhi, 2024). In addition, ChatGPT has also been proven helpful for performing complicated tasks such as lesson planning (Kim et al., 2023) or test design (Zirar, 2023).

Although ChatGPT has been welcomed in the language classroom contexts (Bin-Hady et al., 2023), some have expressed concerns about ethics and authenticity (Vaccino-Salvadore, 2023). Du & Alm (2024) observed that despite ChatGPT's capability to provide feedback to the learners, it lacks the empathy of human teachers, which emphasises the continued role of human educators in motivating students. How ChatGPT should be systematically implemented in the classroom, its roles in language assessment, and ethical issues in language education are also important questions. There is also a notable gap in studies exploring how language learners autonomously use ChatGPT to learn languages independently, in a self-paced, flexible mode.

Another limitation of current research at ChatGPT and language learning intersection is the lack of diversity in the languages studied. Li et al. (2024), in their systematic review of research conducted in 2022 and 2023 on the use of ChatGPT for language learning, noted that the

majority of research conducted on this topic has dealt with English only. Significant gaps also exist in research on using ChatGPT to study low-resource languages, indicating a need for more diverse and inclusive studies in this area. Zammit (2024), for example, explored the use of ChatGPT in teaching Maltese – a language with low resources- and found that ChatGPT had a limited understanding of this language. Apparently, research can be expanded to study how ChatGPT can be useful for other languages with lower resources, such as Vietnamese.

Research in language teaching and learning usually highlights the role of learners' autonomy (Benson, 2007) and motivation (Dornyei, 2005) to achieve long-term success. Recently, the role of technology has also been emphasised as a tool that can assist language learning, and data-driven learning (Johns, 1991) has been proven to be an effective language-learning method. Observing the potential of open-access large-language models such as ChatGPT, we seek to investigate whether it can serve and be perceived as a virtual assistant to language learners to learn Vietnamese, Vietnam's official language and a popular language spoken by nearly 100 million people all over the world (Nguyen et al., 2018).

## Methodology

The current study investigates the potential of using ChatGPT as a language learning assistant, which can have further application in other disciplines and in both contextual and practice-oriented studies. To bridge the current gaps in this research area, we decided to focus on Vietnamese – a language with low resources. We also decided to study learners at the beginning level, as these learners would need the most support, and if ChatGPT could prove to be helpful, this tool could allow them to jump-start in their language-learning journey. Our research is guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent do learners perceive ChatGPT as a helpful tool for Vietnamese learning at the beginning levels?
2. How should ChatGPT be used by learners to learn Vietnamese vocabulary?

This study takes the action-research approach, involving a cyclical process of designing, implementing, observing, and refining educational practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2004). With this cyclical design, we could monitor our approach based on feedback from learners and improve the research instruments – a set of prompts to interact with ChatGPT to learn Vietnamese. The process of adjustments to the AI tool's instructional capabilities was linked to the analysis of their experiences, shared through reflections posted on our digital sharing page (Padlet).

In the first cycle, we conducted the following tasks systematically:

- Creating and validating a set of prompts that learners could use to interact with chatGPT to learn Vietnamese.
- Have volunteered participants join the learning sessions with ChatGPT.
- Collect their feedback, analyse the data, reflect & plan for the next cycle.

Five participants volunteered to join this study. They were non-Vietnamese residents working in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and were learning Vietnamese at the time of the experiment. After being introduced to this prompt set, they were asked to conduct a 30-minute chatting session with ChatGPT using these prompts and provide feedback on their learning experience. The answers from Padlet were collected, analysed and coded to identify the respondents' overall impression of learning Vietnamese via ChatGPT, its strengths and areas for

improvement. The data from this cycle then were further reflected upon by the researchers, leading to adjustments for the next cycles of research. This iterative process aimed to refine the use of ChatGPT for language learning through continuous feedback and improvement. The next section, Results and Discussion, will further elaborate on the details of these tasks.

## Results & Discussion

### 1. Prompt Creation and Validation

The first task in this research cycle featured the design of a set of prompts that can be used to interact with ChatGPT for Vietnamese language learning, which was used later by the participants to try learning the language in a topic of their choice. The provided set included prompts asking ChatGPT to generate topic-specific vocabulary, reading passages, word definitions, and language tests. As an advanced chatbot that is based on a large language model, ChatGPT has the capacity to both generate random texts with high authenticity and to provide answers and explanations for various topics. The prompt design stage considered both of these capabilities of ChatGPT. Following Nation (2022:63), we focused on designing prompts that can help learners elicit the most general aspects of vocabulary knowledge at the beginning levels - A1 and A2 according to the Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR). These aspects include the spoken and written forms, meaning, and use of vocabulary. The latest updates of ChatGPT allowed it to pronounce words and read sentences aloud, which facilitates learners' learning of both spoken and written forms of Vietnamese. In terms of meaning, only the most basic word meanings were targeted, while more complicated aspects (e.g., associations, or constraints on use) were not the focus of the drill. Collocation (Nation, 2022:101) was also considered in the process of creating the prompts since it helps the learners focus on the contextualisation of the words. Based on this theoretical framework, the following five-step prompts were created to help learners explore and learn Vietnamese vocabulary in context:

Step	Focus	Prompt Details
1	Generate and read	<p>“Generate a [number] words passage about the topic [insert topic] in Vietnamese. The passage should be suitable for learners at the level [your level].”</p> <p>e.g. Generate a 50-word passage about the topic of foods in Vietnamese. The passage should be suitable for learners at the level A1</p>
2	Analyze word part	<p>“Provide word-part analysis of the sentences in this paragraph. Explain in [your preferred language].”</p> <p>e.g. Provide word-part analysis of the sentences in this paragraph. Explain in English.</p>
3	Explore pronunciation and word meaning	<p>“What is [insert word]? Explain in [your native language]”</p> <p>e.g. What is [bánh mì]? Explain in English</p> <p>[The participant can click on the loudspeaker icon on ChatGPT to get pronunciation]</p>

4	Explore collocations / words in other contexts	“Give [number] sentences that contain the word [insert word]”  E.g. Give 3 sentences that contain the word [bánh mì].
5	Generating exercise	“Based on this reading, give me a vocabulary test consisting of [number] multiple-choice questions. Do not reveal the answers until I ask you.”  [Paste your generated in Stage 1]
6.	Checking your answer.	[Type your answers] Is it correct?

**Table 1: The list of prompts used by the participants to engage with learning via ChatGPT**

This prompt set was initially created by trial and error, where the researchers themselves experimented with ChatGPT to find the optimal prompts that would give consistent results. In addition, since ChatGPT has been known to produce hallucinated answers, we believed that a process of validating these prompts was needed. After the prompt set was finalised, we asked two Vietnamese native language teachers to try out the prompts repeatedly 20 times with various topics such as food, daily items, shopping, and directions and with different levels (A1, A2, B1, B2) to evaluate the content being generated and the answers ChatGPT provided for the questions involved in steps 5 and 6. We requested the validators to evaluate the answers in terms of 1) the naturalness of the text being generated, 2) the clarity of explanation, and 3) the correctness of the answers for the tests questions.

This validation process was carried out using both ChatGPT 3.5 and ChatGPT4 (the legacy model), with the latter providing more accurate answers. While ChatGPT4 gave accepted responses for most of the prompts given across these levels, some test questions it designed for level B2 (Prompts #5 and #6) showed signs of hallucination and were not agreed by the validators. Therefore, overall, the verification process resulted in a success rate of 90% (18 out of 20 times), and ChatGPT 4 appeared to be quite a reliable tool for generating vocabulary in context, explaining, and testing vocabulary at lower levels. For the beginning levels – A1 and A2, the responses generated by ChatGPT were agreed by the validators in 10 out of 10 times. Therefore, we believe that it can be a reliable language assistant for learners at these levels.

## 2. The Participants' Feedback

The feedback from learners has been largely positive, with many highlighting the effectiveness of the provided prompts. One participant underlined their enthusiasm, saying that “the prompts were a game-changer. They guided my interactions with ChatGPT, keeping me focused on my learning goals.” The self-paced structure was particularly appealing, highlighted by one of the respondents, who observed, “The self-paced structure and interactive feedback made it easy and enjoyable to learn.” These comments highlight the power of ChatGPT to allow the learners to tailor the lesson in their own way and pace, something which traditional classrooms cannot afford (Kohnke et al., 2023; Song & Song, 2023; Xiao & Zhi, 2024). Therefore, it appears that ChatGPT can be used by the participants in our study to help them learn Vietnamese outside the classroom.

While the learners' positive reactions while engaging with ChatGPT in their Vietnamese learning sessions indicate their willingness to accept using technology in language learning, they also have implications from the adult learning perspective. In general, theories related to adult learning have emphasised the importance of experience (Kolb, 2014), whereby the learners learn best via meaningful construction of knowledge. In this case, the experiential

learners perceived that they could build knowledge through interaction with the AI through autonomous, self-directed learning. Constructivism underlines the importance of personal experiences and interactions with the world as the foundations of the knowledge-building process (Piaget, 1977). In the context of in-demand language learning, constructivism positions the learner as the primary agent of the learning journey. Following this statement, ChatGPT supports constructivist principles by offering an interactive environment where learners can engage with language content in a contextual and meaningful way while defining their objectives and interests by themselves. The prompts act as an encouragement to explore language in real-world scenarios, building vocabulary and grammar knowledge through experiential learning (Kolb, 2014). As ChatGPT acts as a conversational partner by providing immediate feedback and allowing learners to control the pace and content of their learning, it creates an active, contextual, and personalised learning surrounding.

Interestingly, one of the respondents described the ChatGPT learning experience as “chatting with a tutor who could instantly help with new words and phrases.” To this end, it seems the learner had acknowledged ChatGPT as a real human. This comment was in line with the findings by Du and Alm (2024), who reported in their study that several students “experienced a sense of companionship” and were motivated to study by interacting with ChatGPT. However, the authors also noted that not all students would feel the same, as several others expressed the need for more human interactions. The preference for a real human teacher may also be shown in some feedback showing concerns about the limitations of ChatGPT, such as its inability to “capture cultural nuances,” and some learners expressed uncertainty about the bigger improvements in their language skills in the long term, considering Chat’s limitations. These concerns are similar to those expressed by Zammit (2024), who suggests that ChatGPT is still limited in understanding languages with low resources. As ChatGPT is continuously being updated, with more training and fine-tuning, it is highly potential that this language model will be improved to address these concerns.

On the other hand, it needs to be added that the learners’ feedback may vary depending on factors such as their motivation or their level of technological acceptance (see Pan, 2020), or even the quality of the answers they received based on the version of ChatGPT that they used. The differences in learning results can be observed when using various models of ChatGPT (4, 4o, and 4o mini), with the paid version providing more stable outcomes and fewer instances of AI “hallucination.” Despite considering this issue and introducing improvements to the workshops and materials, learner feedback on using ChatGPT for language learning is mixed and somewhat general, reflecting limitations in the current data collection method. The lack of detailed engagement from learners underscores the importance of motivation and autonomy in language learning, and it points to the continued need for formal classrooms and human interaction. Additionally, the concept of “prompt literacy” (Hwang, 2023), along with issues related to technology acceptance and the need for formal linguistic knowledge, are noted as potential barriers to fully integrating ChatGPT into language learning. These challenges suggest that while ChatGPT has potential, it is not a complete substitute for traditional language learning methods. As we further observed, ChatGPT can provide a good and cost-effective preparation before engaging in in-class teaching or traveling, which meets our aims, leading to the practical application of the project.

Last but not least, in the context of self-directed language learning with ChatGPT, the cognitive load theory and the cognitivist approach were critical for understanding effective learning principles. Cognitive load theory, proposed by John Sweller (1988), emphasises that “learners have limited working memory capacity, and instructional design must be structured to avoid overwhelming them.” According to this finding, still valid nowadays, we realise that when

using ChatGPT as a tutor, it's essential to consider how much information the AI presents at once, ensuring that learners can process vocabulary, sentence structure, and grammatical rules without overloading their cognitive processes. The cognitivist approach to learning, which focuses on internal mental processes such as perception, memory, and problem-solving, supports this by suggesting that learning occurs best when the information is scaffolded and aligned with the learner's current cognitive abilities (Piaget, 1977). Deciding by themselves on the difficulty level and managing their in-session time, the learners were able to self-monitor the process, thus avoiding exceeding the cognitive load level.

We were referring to the basics of cognitivism and constructivism, applying primary definitions that remain quoted in further, more context-based resources, as we recognize ChatGPT as a groundbreaking tool, which still waits for its set of methodological approaches. Unpacking the theoretical findings further, we observed that by providing clear, concise explanations and immediate feedback, ChatGPT helps reduce cognitive load, allowing learners to focus on essential learning tasks. This can be achieved by working with dedicated prompts and a guided approach, which we provided to the learners. Additionally, ChatGPT's capacity to offer personalized prompts and exercises can be adjusted to meet learners' individual needs, thus optimizing the balance between cognitive load and learning efficiency (Mayer, 2002).

## Conclusion

The findings of this project provide a consistent framework for further application and possible research dissemination. To keep up with the dynamics of technological development, for example, ChatGPT's implementation of the newest real-time voice feature, we are considering designing the next cycle of research based on modified parameters. The main thought of this project was related to the structurization of the approach to the tool, focusing on the optimization of the provided functions to ensure a stable and understandable learning experience.

The potential application of this project is significant in revising self-guided language learning in modernized societies, particularly for languages that are underrepresented in digital learning tools, such as Vietnamese. ChatGPT's ability to provide personalized, natural feedback can serve as a flexible, cost-efficient tool for learners at beginner levels. It can be useful for foreign lecturers who need to acquire language skills quickly for integration into new environments, thus feeling more confident and well-prepared when facing new surroundings. Beyond Vietnamese, the methodology developed in this project could be adapted to other less digitally-supported languages, creating a model for global language acquisition. This project also highlights the role of AI in augmenting traditional language education, offering a complementary tool for classrooms and individual learners, which can be also applied to RMIT courses after deeper consideration of ethical and data protection issues. More research is needed to validate whether the prompts can be used in other languages or how to respond to the rapid development of Chat.

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## Comics as Additional Lesson Material in the Vietnamese GFL Classroom

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### Abstract

In the context of L2 language teaching, minor changes to teaching material can have significantly positive effects on student participation and on-task attention (cf. Masuhara 2022, Tomlinson & Masuhara 2018, Timmis 2013, Ur 2015). Using comics as learning material has been found to have positive effects on students' participation and learning outcomes (i.e. Dudzińska, 2013; Öz & Efecioglu 2015; Hoang, 2021; Engels & Preußer, 2022). This paper presents data and discussion on the implementability and effects of specifically designed comics as additional learning material for a German as a foreign language (GFL) university course in Vietnam. In the past, students' lack of prior L2 cultural knowledge on advanced level had made interactive classroom activities difficult resulting in teacher-centred instead of student-centred teaching. This motivated the researchers to adapt the lesson material while adhering to curriculum and textbook. The specially designed comics were implemented in two B2 level courses with 51 students in face-to-face and online lessons between April and July 2024. In a mixed-method approach, notes of naturalistic classroom observation, written student productions and follow-up student questionnaires were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. The focus was on effects on student motivation, specific cultural knowledge and vocabulary learning. The paper further discusses the choice of medium and its added value in relation to practicability, effort and feasibility in the Vietnamese university classroom and GFL textbook syllable. The comics showed to be an effective medium to motivate and provide students with sufficient cultural knowledge and vocabulary to actively and independently participate in class. To foster the learning of specific learning outcomes, comics need to be integrated into a lesson plan with other exercises and teacher input. While teachers wish to have more flexibility to include additional materials, support from institutional side is needed to bring more versatile and current learning material to the classroom.

*Keywords:* Comics, German as foreign language, Vietnamese students, cultural knowledge, additional lesson material, GFL textbook

### Introduction

A motivating introduction to a new learning topic can increase learners' interest in the subject and their motivation to actively engage in classroom activities. Orally collecting first ideas about a new topic can grant the teacher insight to students' prior knowledge and offers the students valuable talking time. Yet, if L2 learners are either hesitant to speak due to a feeling

of foreign language anxiety (FLA)<sup>1</sup>, are not motivated to participate, or do not have applicable prior knowledge, an interactive introduction to a new topic can be difficult to impossible to realise. The presented paper arises from this experience, made in German as a foreign language (GFL) classrooms at University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH) in Ho Chi Minh City. USSH runs one of Vietnam's major German language university programmes. In the past, students showed a lack of prior cultural knowledge about certain mandatory topics of the textbook syllabus, e.g. historical events. Visual prompts provided by the textbook did not elicit associations or the motivation to enquire and engage to build on conversation and further learning. This left the lecturer with the sole option of introducing the topics through teacher-centred teaching. Neither could the desired extent of student talking time and class discourse engagement be met nor a spark in students' motivation to learn more about the topic be noticed. The differences between the Vietnamese learners' cultural-historic background and that of the German target language can be significant. Specific cultural knowledge about German speaking countries that is needed to understand even simple prompts cannot be assumed. To bridge the gap between textbook and students' current knowledge, the authors decided to adapt the lesson material (cf. Masuhara 2022, Tomlinson & Masuhara 2018). To adhere to the curriculum and the textbook syllabus, the adaptation form of choice was adding material that would be specifically designed. Top-down material decisions in educational institutions and the educators' assignment to follow prescribed curricula with selected materials is an important factor in teachers' consideration on whether to adapt material or not (Masuhara 2022, Tomlinson & Masuhara 2018). Considering the challenge, formulated by Timmis (2022: 31), of developing speaking learning material that provides "practice in a range of contexts and genres", we decided to implement comics<sup>2</sup>. Using comics in the foreign language classroom has been found to have several positive effects on learners and educators. They have a motivating effect on students to engage in creative writing and speaking classroom activities (cf. Schwürer, 2005; Dudzińska, 2013; Calafato & Gudim, 2021; Hoang, 2021; Engels & Preußner, 2022) and showed to take a supportive function in vocabulary development (Öz & Efecioglu 2015). Comics provide creative storytelling characteristics as visualization, panel-to-panel narration, and combination of image and language etc. (McCloud, 2001; Packard et al., 2019; Kesper-Biermann, 2022). In combination with the option to turn or scroll back the medium offers unique possibilities to embed and provide linguistic and culture-specific content.

This paper is the first to present a mixed method-based analysis of the implementability and effects of specifically designed comics as additional lesson material for advanced topics in the Vietnamese university GFL classroom.<sup>3</sup> Three purposes of using comics in the L2 classroom are tested. Are comics suitable to 1) motivate students to actively participate in spoken communicative practices on advanced topics,

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<sup>1</sup> The hesitation to speak is a phenomenon connected to foreign language anxiety (FLA) and has been found with learners of different cultural backgrounds and different target languages. Studies on FLA of learners of German language have been conducted with Greek (Chatzidimou & Sidopoulou, 2023), Turkish (Oflaz, 2019), Jordan (Rabadi & Rabadi, 2022) students. The majority of studies on students from South East Asian and Asian cultural backgrounds focus on EFL, e.g. Dinh & Thi (2022) in Vietnam; Amat Suparia et al. (2022) in Malaysia; Liu & Huang (2011) in China; Kondo (2005) in Japan; or on non-European languages, see Djafri & Wimbari (2018) on Japanese, Korean, and Arabic in Indonesia. Hoai (2023) presents oral language mediation practices to promote speaking skills of Vietnamese GFL learners at the Faculty of German Language and Culture, VNU University of Languages and International Studies.

<sup>2</sup> The term comic summarises a broad and heterogeneous spectrum of image-text combinations. An overview of the definition of termini can be found in Dudzińska (2013), for terminology and forms see McCloud (2001) and Packard et al. (2019), for terminology and history see Schikowski (2018), for history and (pedagogical) reception see Kesper-Biermann (2022). Differences between comics and manga are not discussed in this article.

<sup>3</sup> While studies on the usage of pre-existing comics have been conducted with GFL learners with European cultural background (e.g. Dudzińska, 2013), no study with students in Vietnam exists. These students have no first-hand experience of the target language's culture that differs significantly from their own. Up to date, there has been one study conducted on the use of comics in the EFL classroom in Vietnam (cf. Hoang 2021). It focuses on motivating the students to speak in everyday conversations on introductory level, no deeper cultural knowledge or advanced language skills are addressed.

- 2) impart cultural knowledge connected to the target language, and
- 3) embed new vocabulary including B2-level grammatical structures to use in language activities?

To do that, two topics of the GFL textbook *Aspekte neu B24* syllable were identified that had been experienced to be difficult for former student cohorts. For the cohort of 2024, one-page comics were designed as additional classroom material. Between April and July 2024, one of the authors implemented the comics in class, documented her observations and collected student products (presentation slides, comics, video clips) for analysis. To expand the data on the students' perspective and their perceived learning experience, an online questionnaire was conducted. The paper also places the question of implementability in a Vietnamese L2 classroom in a wider context. Data on Vietnamese GFL teachers' perspectives on the use of textbooks and additional learning material was collected for analysis through another online questionnaire.

The paper further discusses the choice of medium and its added value in relation to practicability, effort and feasibility in the Vietnamese university classroom and GFL textbook syllable.

### **Comics in the (German as a) Foreign Language Classroom**

The comic genre serves as a catch-all for picture stories that tell a story via at least two consecutive individual pictures, so-called panels. By telling stories through a series of individual images temporality and complex narrative threads can be developed (cf. McCloud 2001; Abel & Klein, 2016)<sup>5</sup>. The visual design gives insight to cultural context and supports the creation and understanding of atmosphere and emotions (cf. Eisenmann, 2022; Corti & Neuhofer 2022). Situations are presented through the perspectives of the characters and thus give the reader the opportunity to see a situation through different views (cf. Volkmann 2015). This can support reflection of content and present topics with a broader perspective. Successful comprehension of comics is a complex "process of perceiving, processing and understanding" Grünewald (2000, 37). Its success depends on a comic's narration through design (e.g. usage of panel-to-panel transitions, gutters, image-text coherence) that allows the reader to follow its storyline. On the recipients' side, it depends on their multiliteracies skills<sup>6</sup>, digital competence for online/digital comics, world and culture-specific knowledge that are needed to decode the panels' (pictorial) language and symbols<sup>7</sup>. The later knowledge cannot be generally assumed for foreign language learners. When using comics in the L2 classroom, details of their design and reception must be considered for a positive learning experience and outcome.

Using comics for receptive and productive language exercises has been found to have generally motivating effects on learner groups of different cultural backgrounds and different target languages, e.g. Dudzińska (2013) for Polish students of GFL, Yalçın (2020) for Turkish students of GFL, and Hoang (2021) for Vietnamese students of introductory level EFL. Dudzińska (2013, 291) highlights, "the special potential of comics for learning a foreign

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<sup>4</sup> The *Aspekte neu* textbooks are well established in GFL classrooms for (young) adult learners in Germany and internationally. Otley (2016) shows how textbook adaption of Western global textbooks may become necessary when the books fail the diversity of specific interests and prior knowledge of their heterogenic international student learning groups.

<sup>5</sup> It is the complex storytelling that differentiates comics from cartoons. While comics can tell a (complex) story, explain a process and portrait figures' feelings through different perspectives, cartoons are single drawings that show people's feelings in a snapshot (cf. David Blumstein, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Reading and learning with comics takes and promotes multiliteracies skills such as visual competence, understanding of meaning making by the interplay of two different media (here: text and image), or non-linear texts in different semiotic systems (cf. Volkmann, 2015, 237-238; Eisenmann 2022, 61). Multiliteracies training is central when working with comics in learn settings (cf. Eisenmann 2022, 57). The term multiliteracies has been coined in 1996 by the research group „New London Group“, for further reading see Cazden et al. (1996).

<sup>7</sup> See Corti & Neuhofer (2022) for an analysis of comics in French as foreign language textbooks regarding types of knowledge (linguistic, cultural, world knowledge) that are required to understand the comics.

language (...) could be determined by the interplay of verbal and pictorial components.”<sup>8</sup> Abel & Klein (2016, 102-104) distinguish three kinds of visual elements that can be used to design a panel. Figurative elements are a comic’s figures with their facial expressions, gestures, and actions through which their emotions are conveyed. Symbolic elements include speech bubbles, thought bubbles, onomatopoeias and narrative boxes, so-called captions. Form and shape of the speech bubbles indicate the quality of voice, e.g. shouting, calm etc. Textual elements are the actual written texts, the linguistic elements in the symbolic elements. (cf. Abel & Klein, 2016, 102-104). Text in captions adds the, usually neutral, narrator’s voice (cf. Abel & Klein, 2016, 99-100). Comics’ multimodality and means to visualise communicative situations create a proximity to everyday communication and make them a good basis for dialogue practise (cf. Dudzińska 2013, 296; Eisenmann 2020). L2 textbooks utilise this and implement comics to present verbal communication embedded in their conversational context, to practice dialogues, and give context for further assignments (cf. Dudzińska 2013: 292f on GFL; Hallet, 2015 & Rüschoff, 2013 on EFL). In their action research experiment, Hoang (2021) found their students well guided by the images in communicative situations. They used blank panel comics as stimulus for short dialogues practices for Vietnamese university students learning English on introductory level. Additionally, Hoang (2021) and Yalçın (2020) both found the working atmosphere amongst the students to be more social, supportive and friendly when working on communicative exercises with comics.

Introducing new foreign language and cultural knowledge goes hand in hand with the acquisition of new vocabulary in its semantic context and with its communicative function. Comics and images are used to introduce and practice vocabulary especially on introductory and intermediate levels, e.g. concrete nouns, action verbs, transitive and intransitive verbs, and local prepositions (Plein & Breslauer, 2017; Brinitzer & Damm, 1999; Dudzińska 2013). On the GFL B2 syllabus, we find vocabulary that cannot be simply visually represented by an object. Examples are abstract nouns in fixed noun-verb combinations / light-verb constructions (e.g. einen Entschluss fassen – to take a decision, in Erwägung ziehen – to contemplate). A storyline can help to provide the context needed to establish the semantic context and capture light-verbs constructions with their complements.

In GFL textbooks the practice focus of comics tends to shift from receptive to productive skills as the target language level increases, aiming to practice productive skills on intermediate to advanced level. Of the overall fewer comics used on these levels, most are extracurricular original comics (cf. Dudzińska, 2013). Extracurricular comics could be particularly attractive to learners due to their originality as a linguistic and cultural product that addresses recipients outside of language learning. At the same time, they might present the reader more comprehension hurdles. To conduct our qualitative analysis, it is necessary to design specific comics addressing the topics of the curriculum and the learner group.

## **Data and Methodological Approach**

### **Participants and GFL Textbook**

The data was gathered between April and July 2024 in GFL courses at the Faculty of German Linguistics and Literature of USSH, HCMC, Vietnam. USSH offers programmes in German for Tourism, alongside majors in German for Economics and Teaching Methodology. The teaching staff mainly consists of younger educators, mostly under the age of 45, who have received tertiary education in German as foreign language in Germany. The Vietnamese

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<sup>8</sup> Translated by the authors from German source text.

researcher of the team of authors of this paper has been teaching at USSH since 2018 in online and face-to-face formats. Since 2021, she teaches all B2 level courses. She implemented the comics into her lessons, took notes of her observations in class, and collected written student products. The student participants were 51 Vietnamese university students of two intermediate to advanced level (B2.2 level according to the Common European Reference Framework) GFL courses. The courses ran over the span of one semester and were conducted offline in face-to-face teaching. To test the implementation of comic no. 2 in an online learning setting, one group's lesson was moved online. The textbook used in all B2.2 target level courses at USSH is *Aspekte neu B2* (Koithan et al. 2015, 1st ed.). It features pictures as activity prompts on the opening double page of each unit.

At the time of data collection, the students had already practiced language skills with comics in earlier semesters (designing comics based on texts, writing texts based on silent comics) and with unit 4 in the current textbook. Unit 4 (*Zusammen leben – living together*) is introduced with five non-related cartoons and a one-strip comic. The cartoons are used as speaking prompt about important matters in a society (cf. Koithan et al., 2015, 56f.). In terms of digital literacy and media competence, some students had prior experiences of reading manga, manhwa or webtoons on digital platforms such as Wattpad9. The use of digital tools for comic creation was introduced in the B2.2 level course.

50 GFL teachers participated in the online questionnaire on the handling of textbooks, syllabi, and their implementation. They come from two main groups at USSH: current GFL teaching staff (n=8), current and former GFL students (n=42) with teaching experiences of German and English in Vietnam.

### **Material Adaptation**

According to Masuhara (2022) certain questions should be considered when teachers adapt material. Two of those questions are relevant for our adaptations<sup>10</sup>: “3) Do teacher adaptations support the philosophy and goals of the curriculum? 4) Are the students achieving success in their learning? If so, why? If not, why not?” Masuhara (2022: 284) To confirm Masuhara's question 3), we designed our additional learning material specifically to complement selected topics of the textbook. Choosing the comic medium corresponds to the textbook's approach of introducing a topic using images to elicit prior knowledge. The comics will add their storytelling characteristics. Masuhara's question 4) goes in line with part 1 of our research question about the suitability of comics to motivate students to actively participate in spoken communication practices on advanced topics.

For the development of our additional material, we refer to Timmis (2022). Timmis formulates four principles for developing adequate materials for teaching speaking in the L2 classroom. Along with each principle, Timmis points out challenges to be addressed when aiming to fulfil the principle.

“Principle 1: materials should give learners speaking practice in a range of contexts and genres.” (Timmis 2022: 31) The challenge is to overcome “the limitations of the classroom context, encourage learners to speak in genre-sensitive and context-sensitive ways”. (ibid.)

“Principle 2: the level of challenge of the speaking activity should be carefully calibrated

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<sup>9</sup> As noticed by the Vietnamese researcher during class break times. A structured survey of empirical data on students' media skills was not carried out. A detailed statement about students' multimodal literacy proficiency cannot be made.

<sup>10</sup> The other questions are not relevant for our adaptations. Masuhara (2022: 284) poses the questions from the perspective of educational authorities on teacher adaptations. The other questions concern the effectiveness of the wider curriculum plan and existing materials on the over-all language learning of the students.

according to purpose.” (ibid.) The challenge is to create material that offers teachers options to adjust level and kinds of challenge.

“Principle 3: learners should be given ‘scaffolding’ to help them carry out the speaking activity.” (Timmis 2022: 32) The challenge entails the preparation of students in terms of “language, content, communicative strategies, and confidence” (ibid.) as well as offering rehearsal, repetition, and transparency on how the exercises contribute to the learning goal.

“Principle 4: materials for speaking should raise awareness of features of spoken discourse.” (Timmis 2022: 33) The challenge addresses the identification and implementation of commonly used linguistic phenomena in natural speech of L1 and L2 speakers that is appropriate for the learner target group.

By choosing the comic medium, we aim to meet these challenges.

### **Data Collection and Analysis – Procedure**

Preparation, implementation, data collection and analysis followed these eight steps:

Step 1 – Topic selection: The criterion for topic selection was based on experiences the teaching researcher made with former cohorts. They had deemed the selected topics to be thematically difficult due to a lack of culture-specific historic background knowledge.

Topic 1 (unit 7): the Habsburg imperial family and the UNESCO world heritage site Schönbrunn Palace<sup>11</sup>, grammar: text coherence

Topic 2 (unit 8): travelling back in history: medieval times<sup>12</sup>, grammar: fixed noun-preposition, verb-preposition and adjective-preposition combinations

Application of Timmis’ (2022) principle 1.

Step 2 – Analysis of material: The textbook material was analysed regarding basic specific knowledge needed to understand the topic, vocabulary, and grammatical structures.

Step 3 – Identification of applicable comic means: We identified the creative comic means suitable to design panels transmitting relevant background context and vocabulary. Background knowledge was to be picked up in figures’ conversations and supported by images (e.g. a map of the Habsburg empire in the 18th century, comic 1). Nouns were visualised in pictured objects (e.g. a knight, comic 2). Verbs were to be shown through figures’ actions, as part of their speech or their thoughts. In comic 2, the grammar topic “nouns with fixed prepositions” could be specifically incorporated through the symbolic and textual elements of the characters’ thought bubbles.

Step 4 – Comic design: This step is related to part 3 of our research question, the suitability of comics to embed new vocabulary and B2-level grammatical structures to use in language activities. A storyline was threaded around new vocabulary and grammar introducing new information and creating options for further exercises (dialogue practices, research, presentations, creating own comics, videos etc.). For this, we made use of conversational scenes and situations close to students’ everyday life. Application of Timmis’ (2022) principle 2, 3 and 4.

The one-page comics were structured in three tiers:

<sup>11</sup> *Aspekte neu B2, Unit 7: Kulturwelten*, module 1 *Weltkulturerbe: World heritage* (Koithan et al., 2015, 106f.)

<sup>12</sup> *Aspekte neu B2, Unit 8: Das macht(e) Geschichte*, module 1 *Geschichte erleben: experiencing history* (Koithan et al., 2015, 122f.)

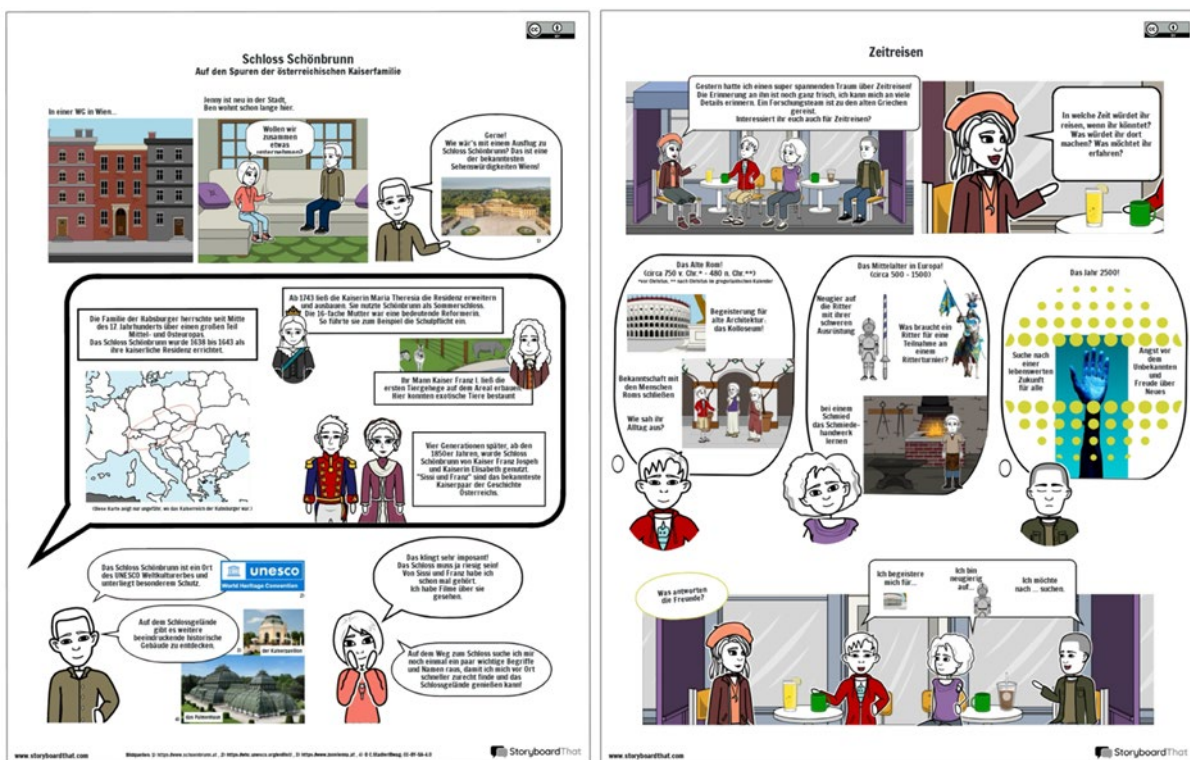
First tier: introduction of topic through figures' dialogue, providing communication context, vocabulary; comic 1: students in Vienna deciding to visit Schönbrunn Palace, comic 2: group of friends in a café talking about time travelling

Second tier: large centre panel, introducing content-related specific aspects, providing specific vocabulary; comic 1: Habsburg family members, comic 2: characters thinking of the eras they would like to travel to and what they would like to experience

Bottom tier: providing options for further productive tasks; comic 1: research the individual sites of Schönbrunn Palace, comic 2: complement speech bubbles with new vocabulary from second tier, option to take question of time travel into a classroom conversation

The comics were designed with the paid version of the in-browser application of [www.storyboardthat.com](http://www.storyboardthat.com).

**Image 1: Comic 1 & Comic 2**



Step 5 – Implementation and documentation: In the introductory phase, the comics introduced topics and vocabulary. They functioned as speaking prompt for dialogue practice, and for vocabulary consolidation and expansion. In the transfer of learning phase, the comics served as basis for creative language production exercises to anchor new contents in knowledge.

Instructions comic 1:

In your group, 13 read the dialogues and speech bubbles with assigned roles.

Work with a partner to look up words you do not know in the dictionary and clarify their meaning in the context of the comic's story. Then, do the vocabulary exercise on page 106 in the textbook to broaden your vocabulary about Schönbrunn Palace.

<sup>13</sup> The classroom set-up focusses on collaboration and seats students in groups around big tables.

Research online: Which tourist attractions in Vienna and Austria would you visit? Which famous Austrian personalities would you like to know more about?

In your group, research your assigned sight within the Schönbrunn Palace grounds. Prepare a presentation that you will hold in front of the class.

Instructions comic 2:

In your group, read the dialogues and complement the speech bubbles with assigned roles.

In plenum: To which time would you travel if you could? What would you do? What would you experience?<sup>14</sup>

Develop a creative product (written story, comic, short video clip) on a story about time traveling. You may work by yourself or in a group.

New content applied proficiently by a student would be counted as incorporated into a student's knowledge. With one group, the researcher met online via google meeting to conduct the lesson with comic 2. The goal was to test if any major differences in implementability and feasibility arise.

To answer part 1 of our research question – the suitability of comics to motivate students to actively participate in spoken communication practices on advanced topics – we made use of naturalistic observation. As the researcher in class was also in the role of the teacher, she noted her observations from memory after the class: Did students engage in spoken classroom activities? Were they motivated to participate? Did students use newly introduced vocabulary?

Written student productions (presentation slides, comics, video clips) were collected digitally. Based on these, and notes from the in-class observation, the usage of new vocabulary and the concepts behind it were documented.

Step 6 – Questionnaires:

Both surveys were conducted in German language. The results were translated by the authors.

Step 6.1: Conducting a voluntary online questionnaire of 1 multiple choice and 7 open-answer questions among students at the end of the B2.2 course. The open-answer format was chosen to collect more individual feedback for qualitative analysis. Questions were posed on difficulties with B2 level topics (multiple choice), which topics are perceived as difficult, how the usage of comics in class is perceived, how comics may influence learning about B2 topics as well as reading comprehension, vocabulary introduction, understanding and applying grammatical structures, speaking and writing. 29 students participated.

Step 6.2: Conducting a voluntary online questionnaire of 9 multiple choice and 1 open-answer questions among GFL teachers. The questions enquired about teaching experience and focused on handling of textbooks: degree of textbook orientation, feeling of and reasons for obligation to use textbooks, challenges and flexibility around textbook usage, implementation of additional materials, attitudes towards textbook orientation and additional lesson materials. 50 teachers participated.

Step 7 – Analyses of naturalistic observation, student productions, questionnaires:

We undertook a qualitative analysis of the teacher's naturalistic observation notes and student productions. We looked at the usage of newly introduced cultural information, vocabulary and

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<sup>14</sup> These are the questions posed by a figure to her friends in comic 2, first tier.



grammar, as well as students' motivation to participate. We ran quantitative analyses of the questionnaires results and drew further findings from qualitatively analysing statements made in open-answer questions. Answers to open questions of identical wording were subsumed under the reoccurring notion (e.g. "history"). Synonyms and different phrasing of the same content were subsumed under an umbrella term (e.g. answers "visual support" and "suitable for visual learners" were counted as "provide visual support"). The results were compared to the experiences the researching teacher had made with previous cohorts who studied in the same programme, with the same textbook.

Step 8 – Discussion: A discussion follows about the choice of self-designed comics as additional lesson material and their added value in relation to practicability, effort and feasibility in the Vietnamese university classroom and GFL textbook syllable.

## **Empirical Findings**

### **Naturalistic Observation and Student Productions**

Students engaged actively in the introduction phases with the comics. After reading comic 1 and using it as a prompt to read the dialogue with assigned roles, a teacher-moderated classroom conversation about the imperial family, monarchy in Austria and the UNESCO heritage site Schönbrunn Palace could evolve. Students showed interest in the activity and engaged in the conversation. The comic also served as impulse for vocabulary acquisition and expansion through small research practises about the topics and by supplementing the introductory vocabulary task from the textbook (Koithan et al., 2015, 106.) In the textbook, Schönbrunn Palace is first introduced by listening to an audio guide of a castle tour. This exercise was now carried out after the introductory phase. In the follow-up conversation of the listening exercise, the researcher noticed how beneficial the prior pre-listening activities were for the students to complete the exercise and talk about the topic. Comic 1 would not have been necessary to simply teach the topic's vocabulary. Its format however provided a low-threshold introduction to the topic and engaging preparation for the textbook exercises.

Comic 2 was used in face-to-face teaching with one group, with the other in an online session. All activities in the online group were held in the main meeting room. Students in both groups engaged actively in the first dialogue practice. The conversation was then expanded to a classroom conversation on the topic of time travelling to experience history. The questions one character in the comic asks her friends, "What era would you like to travel to if you had the chance? What would you like to do there? What would you like to learn?", were posed to the students and discussed in small groups (offline) or in plenum (online). Students contributed ideas from their own prior knowledge and collected their ideas, by the offline group on a board, in the online group on the digital board jamboard.

For both topics and in both formats (offline and online), using a comic as initial input in the introductory phase made a noticeable difference in students' active participation compared to former cohorts. Between the offline and online group no noticeable difference of quality or extent of oral and written student productions was noted. Students used not only the vocabulary from the speech and thought bubbles, e.g. verb-preposition connections, but also contributed own knowledge and ideas. This resulted in an active co-creation in the vocabulary expansion phase. Students' contributions to the classroom conversations showed interest in the topics and new vocabulary and content could be consolidated through repetition and independent application in speaking exercises.

In the transfer of learning phases, the comics were used as bases for further research, presentations and creative writing tasks. For comic 1, the students continued the storyline and researched about the various stations of the palace tour. They worked in groups and presented their findings in oral presentations supported with presentation slides in class. Students used newly introduced vocabulary mentioned in the comics and the textbook. With the presentations, the students expanded their culture-historical knowledge and vocabulary on the topic. They practiced all four skills as well as linguistic means to create text coherence.

For comic 2, the students developed projects on the topic of "time travel". They realised their projects on a self-chosen topic through different media: as a digital comic or video. In their projects, the students did not use any of the nouns with fixed prepositions that had been newly introduced in the comic. They had not been specifically asked to use them and we assume that they did not take this specific vocabulary into consideration when conceptualising their own storylines. The vocabulary might not have been consolidated yet to find its way into creative language products, or simply not have matched the students' communicative needs to tell their story. Further, it can be assumed that the students did not refer to the comic for linguistic input when composing their own projects. Nonetheless, due to the choices of topics for their stories, students could acquire new vocabulary that is specific to their topic and is not explicitly featured in GFL textbooks, e.g. Vietnamese historical events. Students explained specific vocabulary needed to understand their story to fellow students and were thus expanding their own vocabulary in the first step and their fellow students' vocabulary in a following step. The students were highly engaged in this creative assignment and results showed skills of multimodal storytelling and digital competence as the comics and videos were created with online tools.

In comparison to the group presentation on an assigned topic (comic 1), the creative writing task on a topic of choice in the context of the main topic (comic 2) proved less suitable to implement new vocabulary and cultural knowledge. On the one hand, with a more concrete instruction, the practice of specific vocabulary could be promoted. On the other hand, was the focus of the exercise vocabulary expansion and independent language production based on the students' interest. The lessons' vocabulary was further practiced with exercises in the textbook. The degree of student motivation about the project and the quality of the project outcomes, militates for this transfer of learning exercise at this point.

We noted surprisingly high student engaged in interactive classroom activities, in group activities, presentations and creative projects, even for this student cohort. Regarding the creative projects, we relate the engagement also to the high degree of learner autonomy on choice of project topic, design and medium.

### Student Survey Results

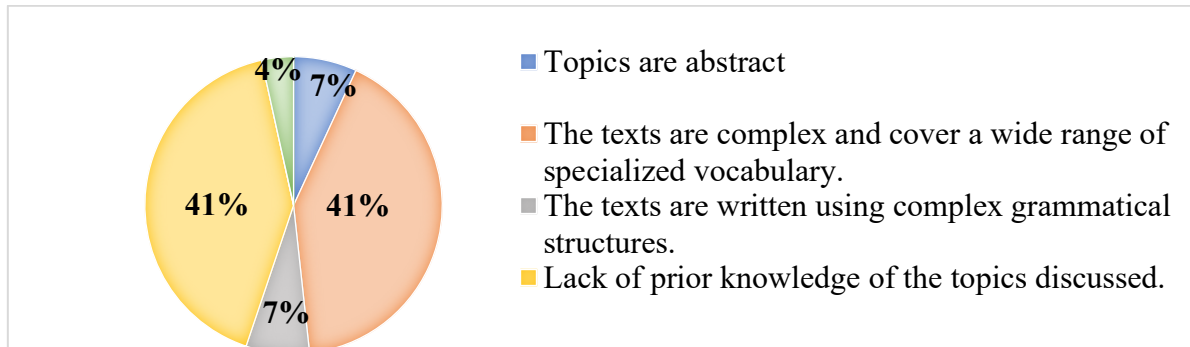
As difficult topics, "History" and "Art, Art History" were mentioned most among the majority of students with 13 and 12 mentions respectively by 13 participants.<sup>15</sup> The topics "Economy", "Psychology", "Politics", "Time travel: Future", "Colours and Emotions", "Berlin Wall or Division of Germany" and "Poverty" were each mentioned twice. As for reasons causing difficulties with topics, 41% (n=12) of students see a lack of prior knowledge about a topic as cause. Just as many see the complexity of texts and their specialised vocabulary as reason. 7% find the abstractness of topics difficult, another 7% complex grammatical structure in texts, and 3,4% (n=1) a lack of encouraging learning activities. This participant found the use of

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<sup>15</sup> Topics were counted by number of mentions in the 26 given answers to the open question "Which topics in the textbook Aspekte B2 do you consider to be "abstract" or "difficult"?" leading to a total of 30 mentions of 9 topics. One student answered "all topics" adding the value 1 to each topic mentioned

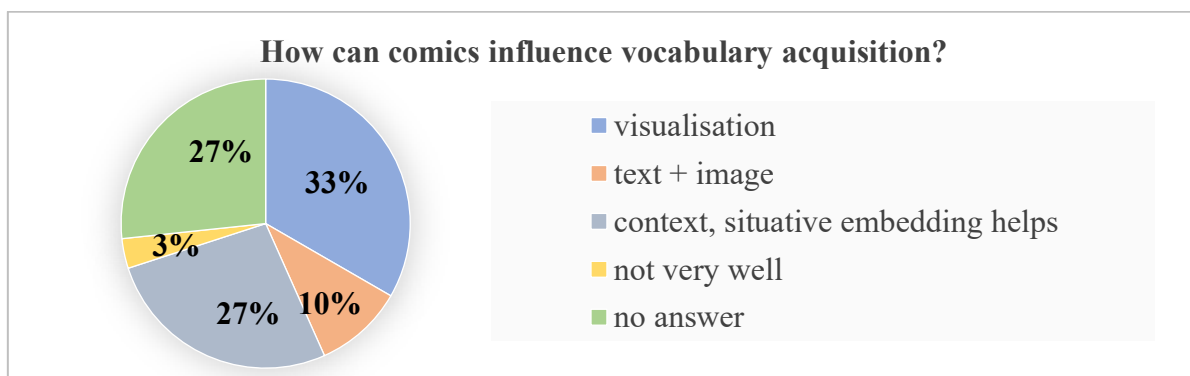
comics in class “very good”. These numbers align with the observations of former cohorts: a cause for low in-class participation can be assumed to base in the knowledge level, not motivational level.

**Figure 1: What difficulties do you have in dealing with topics at level B2? Multiple-choice question, with option to choose one answer.**



To provide an initial source for background knowledge and vocabulary, the comics had been implemented in the lessons’ introductory phases. 69% of all respondents expressed positive feedback on comics’ influence on vocabulary acquisition. Of the 41% (n=12) of students, finding a lack of prior knowledge to cause difficulties, 75% (n=9) reported positive feedback on comics and vocabulary acquisition and 83,33 % (n=10) on comic use in regard to text comprehension<sup>16</sup>. This shows a positive effect of comic use when introducing thematically difficult topics. We find the same values and thus successful result with the 41% (n=12) of students choosing text complexity and specific vocabulary as cause for difficulties: 75 % (n=9) gave positive feedback on the use of comics regarding vocabulary acquisition and 83,33% (n=10) see positive effects in terms of text comprehension. Figure 2 gives an overview over all students’ answers when asked about comics’ influence on vocabulary acquisition. <sup>17</sup>

**Figure 2: How can comics influence text comprehension?**



For vocabulary acquisition and text comprehension, three students mentioned how “guessing” content and meaning was made easier through visualisation of context. The process of guessing involves associative thinking basing on and developing from prior knowledge. The comics supported activating prior knowledge on textual and lexical levels.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noticed again that we did not translate complex written and audio texts from the textbook directly into comics. The answers relate to the comics themselves – featuring simple storylines – and the comics as pre-reading /-hearing input for the complex (audio) texts in the textbook.

<sup>17</sup> Relevant mentions were subsumed under the listed key words. Mentions of positive effects on long-term memorisation were disregarded. On the long-term memorisation no valid subjunctive answer can be given shortly after the lessons.

In terms of grammar comprehension and application, answers that could be subsumed under “use and function in context” were mentioned by far the most frequently (n=8) 30%. Students mentioned keywords 18 such as “situation-appropriate to means of expression”, “many interesting and practical sentences”, “easier and more detailed on why and when we use certain grammar”, “the authentic themes of the comics enable learners to use grammar appropriately”. Responses show that grammar is associated with correct situational use of expressions and communicative competence in the target language. Two students (6.9%) suggest that grammatical structures might be learned implicitly as students are interested in continuing to read the comics. The question on grammar received most negative responses in the questionnaire with 15% of students seeing no influence. 7,5% having “no idea” and another 30% (n=8) leaving no answer. This suggests that the implementation of more abstract grammar topics on intermediate / advanced GFL level into comics needs further investigation.

Table 1 presents an overview over the answers on comics’ influence on productive skills. Mentions of 23 students’ answers categorized as follows, counted are the overall mentions.

**Table 1: How can comics influence productive skills (writing and speaking)?**

	Answer	No. of mentions
1	Promoting creativity	6
2	Acting out dialogues	3
3	Motivating learning environment encouraging students to speak, reducing inhibitions	2
4	Expanding vocabulary	2
5	To effectively use learned vocabulary and idioms	2
6	Working together, teamwork: collaborative writing and speaking skills	1
7	Teaching grammar	1
8	Interesting presentation of information makes it easier to understand content and therefore apply skills more effectively	1
9	Visualization makes content easier to remember, making it easier to apply	1
10	In comics, expressions are used in concrete contexts, which helps learners avoid mistakes in communication.	1
11	Dialogues as examples of effective verbalization of thoughts and feelings	1
12	Overview of topic	1
13	I don't think so	1

Table 1 shows that the most important added value for students in the area of language production lies in creative but also situationally appropriate language production. (rows 1, 2, 5, 10, 11). Three students address positive effects on teamwork and an encouraging classroom environment (rows 3, 7) confirming observations made for EFL learners in Vietnam by Hoang (2021) and GFL learners in Turkey by Yalçın (2020).

In their open question feedback, students emphasised the perceived advantages of visual support and the image-text combination. The comics’ multimodality provided them with visually contextualised examples of communication situations that they perceived as authentic sources to learn from. They found confidence in the source, learning from it to communicate

<sup>18</sup> Translated from German by the authors

correctly and appropriately in German. This meets Timmis' (2022) principle 3 challenge to prepare learners to have speaking confidence. Having this information available can bring a certain sense of certainty and strengthen the students' self-confidence in their own linguistic and communicative skills in the target language. One student experienced "learning grammar without pressure". The written nature of comics certainly contributes to this as the presented information are permanently available. Additionally, the amount of text is much shorter compared to continuous text and with the pictorial support this can reduce the amount of linguistic information to be absorbed. Students further showed awareness about multiliteracies skills. One student demonstrated awareness about active multiliteracies skills when commenting on the influence on grammar comprehension and application from a linguistically productive perspective, "when creating comics: pay attention not only to content but also to grammar". On text comprehension, another student stated that comics can also be "misleading". This indicates an aware, reflective and critical approach to the reception of comics in foreign language lessons and shows important media and multiliteracies skills.

### Teacher Questionnaire Results

The results show an overall openness amongst the teachers to implement additional lesson material. At the time of the survey, all respondents stated to use additional material (their own or from external sources) either regularly (48%) or occasionally (52%). 48% of the teachers wish to have more flexibility in using own materials.

Still, the textbook is the central teaching material in the respondents' foreign language classrooms. 66% of respondents indicated that they "strongly" rely on the textbook, using it as their main source but also incorporating other materials. 20% reported a "medium" reliance on the textbook and deviating from it often. 8% stated that they follow the textbook "very strongly," using it almost exclusively. 6% use the textbook to a "low" extent, treating it as just one of several sources. No respondent indicated that they "do not use" the textbook at all.

The most common reason to follow a textbook, chosen by 35 respondents (70%), is that the textbook provides security and structure for their lessons. The wish of security can be seen as an internal motivation. The other reasons are based on external factors. A total of 26 respondents (52%) state that they follow the textbook due to institutional or school guidelines and / or feel obliged to use the textbook due to these requirements. This corresponds to the findings collected by Masuhara (2022) and Tomlinson & Masuhara (2018) on teachers' reasons for or against material adaptation.

For 10% of teachers this is the only reason to follow a textbook. Of the 52% using the textbook due institutional requirements 23,08% (n=6) have the freedom to use additional material. Another 26,92% (n=7) of the teachers affected by institutional requirements criticise the lack of freedom to adapt their lessons beyond the textbook's structure; criticism that is noted by overall 20% of respondents (n=10). This shows that institutional guidelines are an important external factor. Other reasons for following a textbook are time constrains that prevent teachers from creating their own teaching materials (32%) and that the textbook sufficiently covers the required content (30%). Only 5 respondents (10%) agree that the textbook provides motivating content for students. Overall, 22% of teachers feel an obligation to follow the textbook because they believe it is expected by their students. 42% feel they have the autonomy to incorporate different teaching materials. One teacher positively mentioned the balance between using the textbook as support to structure and prepare lessons and the freedom to enrich their teaching with additional material.

On working with textbooks, teachers show the need for more adaptable, current, interactive and learner-centred teaching materials that better meet their students' needs and preferences:

60% of teachers feel that the textbooks do not adequately address their students' specific learning requirements. 38% of respondents rate textbooks in use to be outdated or not up-to-date. These editions of the textbooks do not reflect current topics or methodologies. 32% of respondents would also like to see more digital learning materials. One teacher states that cultural knowledge should be integrated in every lesson to provide students with cultural background knowledge. This would make lessons more interesting and give students the feeling to learn something applicable in real-life situations in a German-speaking country.

These findings go in line with the students' responses that show a preference for learning materials that are practical, current, culturally relevant, and adaptable to help them effectively use the language in real-life scenarios.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The comics have shown to be an effective medium to provide students with sufficient cultural knowledge and vocabulary to actively and independently converse in spoken and written form on advanced GFL topics. The motivating effect of comics was confirmed for this group of Vietnamese B2 GFL students as was their effectiveness to practice dialogues. Regarding student difficulties with lack of prior topical knowledge, textual complexity, and specific vocabulary, 75% of the students experienced positive effects of the use of the comics in class. The comic-exclusive combination of features can make content more easily accessible and evoke students' confidence in their own L2 speech production. This motivates to continue reading and practicing. Students spend in-class time more efficiently in active language practice based upon which further exercises can be conducted.

Considering implementability, it was essential for our project to design comics specifically complementing the textbook topics and target the desired learning outcomes. On practical design level, sufficient tools are available. Different online platforms offer easily applicable, AI-supported, tools to design comics. On conceptual level, implementing specific vocabulary and grammatical structures according to the syllable and learners' needs and L2 knowledge, needs throughout planning. This might take time and not be feasible for teachers to realise often. Especially for teachers who are already working under time constraints. Yet, the positive learning outcomes and student feedback speak in favour of using specially designed comics for selected topics.

To foster the learning of specific learning outcomes, comics need to be integrated into a lesson plan with other exercises and teacher input. The teacher questionnaire showed a general motivation and openness among teachers towards implementing additional lesson material and generally advancing lesson design and learning experience for the students. As our findings show, specific comics could be appropriate material. Yet, teachers' reasons to follow textbooks leave most with little flexibility for implementation. Positive reasons for textbook use, such as structure and security, should also not be disregarded. If more versatile and current learning material was to be brought to the classroom, support from institutional side is needed. With more flexibility to design their lessons, teachers would have more opportunities to implement material on current topics and in through different media, ensuring that the content remains interesting, culturally relevant and up-to-date. Students strive to be educated with linguistically and culturally authentic learning materials. This not only makes the lessons more engaging but also prepares students for real-life situations in a German-speaking country.

This paper presents links for further investigations into developing comics as specific additional material, for example on the conceptualisation of comics thematizing more abstract

grammar topics on advanced GFL level. We could only superficially look at the application of comics in an online learning setting. Future enquiries into comics as teaching material should be extended to the digital level in detail.

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## **Assistant Language Teachers in Japan: Roles, Teaching Practices, and Classroom Collaboration with Japanese Teachers of English**

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### **Abstract**

Given the increasing importance of English proficiency in Japan's educational landscape, it is crucial to better understand the dynamics between ALTs and JTEs, particularly the nature of their collaboration in the classroom. While research has examined ALTs in Japan, few studies have focused on their roles across various educational levels and the practical realities of ALT-JTE collaboration. The purpose of this paper therefore is to look into the expected and actual roles of an ALT in Japanese public schools from early childhood to secondary education. More importantly, it details the language teaching practices of ALTs vis-a-vis their JTEs, or the dynamics of English language classroom instruction between them. It also discusses key issues, talks about their implications, and gives recommendations on how to further improve this teaching dynamic.

*Keywords:* Japanese English education, assistant language teachers, Japanese teachers of English, team-teaching

### **Introduction**

English plays a pivotal role as the lingua franca of international communication, trade, and diplomacy, especially in a globalized society. However, Japan consistently ranks lower than many other countries in terms of English proficiency (Nutall, 2019). Therefore, to address this pressing issue, the Japanese government, through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), introduced the Rainbow Plan in 2001 to help bolster the proficiency level of students and, in turn, maintain the global competitiveness of the country.

One of the main goals of the Rainbow Plan was to foster a learning environment which aimed to improve the English proficiency of Japanese students within a span of 5 years. Another target of said plan was to help said learners have a much better understanding of the international community. To achieve these, MEXT required all Japanese elementary schools to include English education in their respective curricula which was implemented nationwide in 2011. However, the reality was that the vast majority of primary education teachers were ill-prepared to teach the language, mainly due to lack of training and proficiency (Ohtani, 2010). That is why it was decided that these educators will be helped by assistant language teachers (ALTs) in the classroom when teaching English.

ALTs, together with Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs) and Sports Exchange Advisors (SEAs), were first introduced in Japan through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program which was established by MEXT in 1987. At first, this position was offered only to selected individuals from the United States, but over time, it expanded to include participants from various countries. Due to its success, the abovementioned ministry decided

to widen the scope of the program by allocating ALTs not only in secondary education, but also to all public schools nationwide. This expansion was aimed at accelerating the improvement of English proficiency among Japanese students (MEXT, n.d.).

Unfortunately, however, the program heads quickly found a variety of issues right after its implementation. First of all, the JET program itself has been riddled with inconsistencies with regard to the Japanese and English-translated documents. Secondly, the expected duties and actual roles of an ALT in the classroom were quite ambiguous and were open to a plethora of interpretations (Ohtani, 2010). Third, most Japanese teachers, especially primary school teachers, have inadequate training when it comes to teaching English, which often resulted in their lack of confidence in teaching the subject matter (Hiratsuka, 2023). Lastly, many ALTs have no teaching qualifications and could not teach the subject effectively which troubled a lot of Japanese teachers (Chindemi, 2021).

Given the increasing importance of English proficiency in Japan's educational landscape, it is crucial to better understand the dynamics between ALTs and JTEs, particularly the nature of their collaboration in the classroom. While research has examined ALTs in Japan, few studies have focused on their roles across various educational levels and the practical realities of ALT-JTE collaboration. The purpose of this paper therefore is to look into the expected and actual roles of an ALT in Japanese public schools from early childhood to secondary education. More importantly, it details the language teaching practices of ALTs vis-a-vis their JTEs, or the dynamics of English language classroom instruction between them. It also discusses key issues, talks about their implications, and gives recommendations on how to further improve this teaching dynamic.

### **The Mission and Expected Roles of an ALT in the Classroom**

The information below is taken from the MEXT website (n.d.), which stated the mission and expected roles of an ALT not only in the classroom, but also in school and his or her community. However, keep in mind that the information found below is targeted specifically for ALTs which were hired through the JET program. Of course, ALTs that were hired via private companies are also required to strictly comply with these expectations.

#### **Mission of an ALT**

ALTs are responsible for assisting the Japanese Teacher of English (JTE) and making the lessons fun for the students. Aside from this, however, they also have to be a good role model to motivate and inspire learners to further improve their English skills. They can further share their respective language and culture in class so that students can be more tolerant and appreciative toward the socio-cultural backgrounds of those from outside the country.

More importantly, ALTs have a mission to spread international awareness not only in the classroom, but also in the local community he or she presides in. They should strive to be model citizens as they are the representatives of their respective home countries. This is especially true in the eyes of the local populace who have never seen nor talked to foreigners in person.

Moreover, ALTs can use this opportunity to mingle with the locals and know more about the unique language, cultures and traditions of Japan. Additionally, they can better understand the Japanese mindset and way of living. This way, he or she may be able to bring these experiences back home and share them to his family and friends.

#### **Roles of an ALT**

The main role of an ALT in class is to assist the JTE as he or she gives his or her lessons. Both parties need to collaborate when teaching the lesson, or also known as team-teaching. The Japanese and migrant teachers can plan the lesson together and strategize in such a way that students will be able to enjoy and, at the same time, have fun when learning English.

Naturally, ALTs need to use fluent English in the classroom and refrain from speaking in Japanese as only JTEs can use the local language in class. This is because the students will talk to the former in Japanese once they know they can understand said language. Also, by using English only in class, the ALT can serve as the model for learners to learn from.

Another responsibility of an ALT is to make use of English to explain the lessons in an easy-to-understand manner. This means that they will only utilize simple words and avoid using complex ones so that students can easily comprehend the topic at hand. Additionally, ALTs need to employ a strategy known as scaffolding or a step-by-step process on explaining the subject matter. This is so that students will have a clear understanding about what is being taught in class.

Finally, ALTs can use English to give good feedback such as encouraging and praising the students for their hard work. Positive reinforcements from the migrant teacher are necessary to boost the self-esteem of Japanese learners as many of them lack self-confidence when it comes to their English skills. Simple motivational speeches can go a long way to bolster their morals.

## **Methodology**

This section first talks about the participants. In particular, ALTs were chosen for the present study as they are the ones who could give invaluable insights as to the real situation in the classroom. The second section provides a deeper understanding of their work assignments and schedule. The third part expounds on the data gathering technique which was utilized for information collection. The last section writes on the ethical considerations which were done to safeguard the identities of these individuals.

## **Participants**

A total of 50 participants (18 male, 32 female) had shared their narratives for this study. This included five (5) pre-school (2 male, 2 female), 20 elementary school (5 male, 10 female), 15 junior high school (7 male, 8 female), and 10 high school ALTs (4 male, 6 female) who worked in Okayama, Kanagawa, and Tokyo Prefectures. They came from different parts of the world, including the Philippines, United Kingdom, United States of America, Jamaica, Kenya, Laos, and Vietnam. Their job experiences ranged from zero (0) to more than twenty (20) years. The majority of the participants were under the ‘haken’ contract which required them to work five days a week while some were under the ‘gyomu-itaku’ contract where they got only paid based on the total number of hours they taught in schools per week.

‘Haken’ or a temporary [regular] staff agreement is a type of contract that refers to the three-way written agreement among the BOE, dispatch company, and the ALT. First, the BOE and the dispatch company will have signed a contract to send ALTs to the schools under the jurisdiction of the BOE. After that, said private company will likewise issue employment contracts to individuals it deems fit to do the job as an ALT. The ALT will then be sent to these schools where they will be mingling with both the teachers and students of the school assigned to them. The performance of the ALT will then be assessed by the school and then report it back to the BOE. The contract is usually only good for one year, but can be renewed indefinitely based on the discretion of the dispatch company and the capabilities of the ALT.

‘Gyomu-itaku’ or independent contractor agreement, on the other hand, is a type of contract where the BOE obligates the dispatch company to outsource ALTs where they get paid by the hour. It works the same way as freelancing. However, unlike ‘haken’, this type of contract is considered to be an agreement between two independent organizations. This means ‘gyomu-itaku’ cannot be regarded as an employment contract. Thus, ALTs under this agreement typically have less employment rights, job security and access to benefits and welfare. Similarly, the contract renewal is contingent on the capabilities of the dispatch company to secure the contract with the BOE.

### **Work Assignments and Schedule**

All nursery and kindergarten ALTs in this study were primarily assigned to elementary schools to fulfill their five-day work week schedule based on their ‘haken’ contracts. They normally visited their designated schools once a week, once every two weeks, or once a month, depending on the arrangements made by the BOEs and schools. Additionally, they generally stayed at each school for no more than half a day before returning to their primary assignments.

Next, the school assignments for elementary school ALTs depended on the prefecture and BOE. For instance, in Okayama Prefecture, most BOEs assigned one ALT per school due to smaller number of schools and students, while in larger areas like Tokyo and Kanagawa, ALTs were usually assigned to two or three schools. They often taught four to six classes per day at each school and generally stayed at one school per day, unless otherwise specified in their work schedule. Like preschool ALTs, they followed a fixed schedule based on their contracts.

Similarly, the school assignments of junior high school ALTs varied depending on the arrangements made by the dispatch company. Some were assigned to a single school, while others worked at two to three schools per week. In addition, some ALTs taught both elementary and junior high school classes. Furthermore, they taught around three to five classes per day. And much like the first two, they had to strictly adhere to the schedule due to the nature of their contracts.

In contrast to the previous levels, senior high school ALT positions were generally part-time or semi-full-time due to lower demand largely because the national government controls the allocation of ALTs to most public high schools. As a result, high school ALTs were typically under the ‘gyomu-itaku’ contract, working two to four days a week. They were assigned to two to three schools and generally taught three to five classes per day at each school.

### **Data Gathering Technique**

Narrative inquiry was the main data gathering technique used in this study as it provides a deep insight into the perspectives of ALTs through their lived experiences. Put simply, it refers to the understanding of human experiences through personal and second-hand storytelling. It highlights the importance of stories and lived experiences of different individuals and how they make meaning out of them (Clandinin & Caine, 2013).

The stories and experiences of the ALTs were collected in an eight-year span, dating from August 2016 to August 2024. The data mainly consisted of the personal narratives of participants through individual and group discussions in different settings (i.e. ALTs’ apartments) and events (i.e. group outing) about the realities of being an ALT in Japan. The key aspects of the stories were then collected through the use of field notes as “they aid in constructing thick, rich descriptions of the study context, encounter, interview, focus group, and document’s valuable contextual data” (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018, p. 381).

These field notes were reorganized and categorized into separate themes and patterns based on their repetitiveness in the stories of ALTs. Afterwards, the intended meanings were analyzed and decoded from said themes and patterns. The data were further examined for their narrative significance to provide a much better understanding as to the highs and lows of ALTs through their real-life experiences.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The present study obtained verbal consent from all participants to share their stories, with the understanding that their identities would remain confidential to protect them from potential legal repercussions. Therefore, this paper ensured anonymity by not disclosing their actual names or the name of the dispatch company they worked for. Furthermore, specific details of their experiences were omitted to ensure that the excerpts could not be traced back to them.

### **Actual Teaching Practices of ALTs in Japanese Public Schools**

It is important to note that there is a plethora of ALT dispatch companies in Japan. These are businesses which have signed contracts with different boards of education (BOEs) all over the country. Instead of embassies, these companies are chiefly responsible for screening and hiring qualified individuals for the job at hand, provide adequate training to make sure that they understand all the rules and regulations, and then send these migrant teachers to schools which fall under the jurisdiction of each and every BOE. Therefore, although ideally all ALTs should adhere to the same expectations, it would be quite difficult to do so in practice as their starting points are dissimilar. This part, in particular, talks about the actual roles of ALTs in early childhood, primary and secondary education in Japan.

#### **Teaching in Nursery / Kindergarten**

Though quite uncommon, some BOEs, especially in rural areas, send ALTs to nursery and kindergarten schools. Migrant teachers go to such schools mainly to play and interact with the children so as to expose them early to different people from other countries. ALTs do fun activities with the kids such as playing hide and seek and ‘catch-me-if-you-can’ in the playground, as seen in excerpt 1.

[Excerpt 1] Whenever I go to [pre-]school, the teachers want me to play with the kids in the playground. I usually play [the games] ‘catch-me-if-you-can’ and ‘hide-and-seek’ with them. I also push some of them in the swing and they love it.

They also do role-playing games such as playing the role of Santa Claus during Christmas and handing out presents to children, as shown in excerpts 2 below.

[Excerpt 2] I had fun dressing up as Santa Claus during a Christmas event in school. I had to enter the room through the window and was greeted by children [together with their parents] who were very excited to see me. They came to me one by one as I gave them presents prepared by the Japanese teachers beforehand to the kids. It was a lot of fun. I want to do it again.

[Excerpt 3] They [the children] easily get distracted, so I have to be extra energetic when teaching them the alphabet. They repeat after me energetically as well, but some just want to go to my lap and play with me.

On the other hand, teaching English is quite simple as ALTs only need to teach them how to say the alphabets and even say the names of some animals. In addition, all teaching materials are already available for the ALT to use, so preparation time can be skipped. More importantly,

they need to be more energetic than usual when teaching to get the attention of the kids. Excerpt 3 indicates that the teachers have to be animated and happy all the time so that the students can enjoy their time. English sessions only last for a short while before the children either take a nap, play in the playground, or eat lunch.

### **Teaching in Elementary Schools**

As mentioned earlier, most Japanese elementary school teachers lack training regarding how to teach English. And since ALTs were assumed to be given proper training on how to conduct English classes, they are the ones responsible for handling the entire classes while the JTE assists him or her. As such, ALTs are recognized as ‘Teacher One’ (T1) or the lead teacher and the JTEs as ‘Teacher Two’ (T2) or assistant teacher. Before that, though, they often talk to the JTE about the lesson plan so that the latter is aware of the overall flow of the lesson at hand. Some JTEs even share their ideas on how to make their lessons better, as evident in excerpt 4.

[Excerpt 4] I make sure to talk to my JTEs [before classes start] about the lessons of the day so that they also know what is going on. It helps that they sometimes have interesting suggestions to share which improve the lessons I prepared.

Inside the classroom, the ALTs act as the T1 for the entire English class. They usually start with the greetings followed by warm-up questions. Afterwards, they either introduce a new lesson or continue with the last one. And then, they play games with the students to engage them in the learning process. Finally, they end the class with a five-minute summary of the lesson. As for the teaching style, ALTs need to be energetic when teaching the lessons so as to get the attention of the students, which is quite similar to pre-school teaching. The key difference between the two is that ALTs need to maintain this level of energy throughout the day in elementary school, which can be quite exhausting as excerpt 5 reveals.

[Excerpt 5] I love teaching in elementary schools, but it is very exhausting. I have to teach four to six classes most of the time, and I have to remain energetic all day. I am usually super tired after each [working] day.

[Excerpt 6] My school actually allowed me to use a small, vacant classroom when I asked [the vice-principal and the head teacher] if I could use one bulletin board for English. [That is why] I often spend my free time either creating teaching materials or decorating the room.

Moreover, as mentioned in excerpt 6, many schools give ALTs the freedom to be more creative, like letting them have their own “English Corner”, “English Bulletin Board” or even an “English Classroom” where they can design it as they see fit. This is especially true if only one ALT is assigned to a particular school for the school year. ALTs can also make use of different school equipment such as laminators and printers to create both teaching and bulletin board materials. Naturally, they need to get permission from the principal, vice-principal or head teacher before they can use any of this equipment.

Furthermore, in some schools, the teachers request for the ALTs to play with the students during their recess time as it establishes rapport between the foreign teachers and their students. Excerpt 7, in particular, suggests that ALTs not only have fun with the kids, but they also help them clean the school during cleaning time which happens right after lunch break.

[Excerpt 7] I usually go outside and play with the students in the field during their break times. We play many different games like frisbee, basketball and ‘catch-me-if-you-can’. I also help them [students] clean the school premises like mopping the floor, wiping the chairs and desks, and even taking out weeds in the field.

[Excerpt 8] I substituted in a couple of [elementary] schools where they have a [specially-appointed] JTE who handled most of the lessons. I just did my role as the energetic ALT and played some games with them.

More recently, however, as can be seen from excerpt 8, many BOEs in Tokyo and Kanagawa Prefectures have designated a JTE solely responsible for teaching English with the ALT mainly assisting him or her. In this case, the roles are reversed as the JTE becomes the T1 and the ALT turns into T2. The Japanese teacher informs the migrant teacher about his or her lesson plan. ALTs usually just need to follow the plan and let the JTE handle most of the class, which is quite similar to teaching junior and senior high schools.

### **Teaching in Junior and Senior High Schools**

This is where teachers start to specialize in particular subject matters such as English, Social Studies, Science, Mathematics, Physical Education, and so on. Therefore, unlike elementary school teachers, the JTEs in secondary education are better equipped with teaching techniques and strategies on how to teach English. Furthermore, depending on their BOEs, they are required to attend regular teacher training sessions to improve their team-teaching skills, thus making them more informed and trained about how to teach the class with the ALTs. That said, synergy is important in team-teaching, and this requires both JTEs and ALTs to be on the same page.

In the classroom, the JTEs normally teach the classroom by themselves and mainly require their ALTs to stand in the corner and pronounce vocabulary words when called upon. As many ALTs call it, their jobs in the classroom are basically to serve as a “walking tape recorder” or a “portable dictionary”, as shown in excerpt 9.

[Excerpt 9] I do the same thing every class. I just stand at the back of the classroom and wait for my JTE to tell me to pronounce vocabulary words and any English word that she wants the students to practice [pronouncing]. Other than that, I just wait for the class to end and repeat the cycle all over again.

This kind of situation often occurs when the JTE has already prepared the entire lesson beforehand. They have a brief meeting with the ALT simply to tell him/her about what he/she is expected to do during the lesson. On the other hand, excerpt 10 shows that many JTEs are more open-minded and are able to think of multiple ways to include the ALTs in the actual lessons.

[Excerpt 10] My JTE always involves me in his lessons. He sometimes asks questions about my country’s culture and tradition in front of the class. Other times he lets me practice English conversations and even role-play with the students.

[Excerpt 11] The new JTE asks me about my opinion on how to improve her lesson plans and actually implements it. It makes me feel appreciated.

Excerpt 11 shows that younger Japanese teachers, in particular, are more proactive in asking for the opinions of their assistant teachers on how to make the classes better. Some JTEs even ask their ALTs to create fun activities or tasks which they can use in the classroom. In these cases, ALTs are often tasked to do the greetings, ask some warm-up questions, practice English conversations with the students, and provide some feedback.

As for what ALTs do outside the classroom, many JTEs ask them to create worksheets for the students to answer. Naturally, the JTE needs to double-check and approve the activities before



being used in class. It depends on the lesson though, as there are some days where the ALT is on standby in the faculty room for his or her next task, as stated in excerpt 12.

[Excerpt 12] She [The JTE] often lets me create worksheets which we can use in class. Sometimes, I have to redo some parts because she wanted me to change them. [Other times,] I just stay in the faculty room and review my lesson materials while waiting for her to give me some tasks to do. [This is because] I did not want to bother her too much since she is always busy.

### **Issues Concerning the Roles of ALTs and JTEs**

The disparity between the expected roles and actual practices in the classroom of ALTs could be attributed to a variety of factors. These migrant teachers were specifically incorporated in most, if not all, Japanese public schools by the BOEs in order to teach the subject matter at hand and to share their culture and traditions to students (Sifakis, 2006; Shibata, 2010). And given the opportunity, many ALTs would be more than happy to talk about their unique socio-cultural experiences in the classroom.

That being said, with the current teaching practices across the majority of Japanese public schools, but most especially in both the junior and senior high school levels, it would be quite difficult for said foreign teachers to fulfill the duties that were expected of them. In fact, only about half of ALTs believe that they have played a significant role in the classroom, which was already higher than expected (Turnbull, 2018).

The same could be said for JTEs as team-teaching is quite difficult to do as it mostly depends on the relationship and synergy between the two parties involved. That is why other ALTs may have different experiences with their JTEs. This is because the latter were able to more effectively incorporate the former in the lessons due to both sides having better overall communication (Smith, 2021; Takeda, 2017).

### **Issues with Assistant Language Teachers**

One of the most noticeable issues as to why ALTs have a more limited role than expected in the classroom is mainly due to their teaching qualifications, or lack thereof. MEXT has adopted the eligibility criteria set forth by the JET program when hiring individuals for the position, and that is a bachelor's degree in any field. A degree related to English or education is only optional. As a result, most freshly-hired ALTs have little to no teaching background. This makes it quite inconvenient for JTEs to explain in detail their lesson plans to them and thus, make team-teaching a challenging endeavor (Hasegawa, 2008; Chindemi, 2021).

[Excerpt 13] I was lucky to have been assigned to a school with a kind and understanding JTE as he taught me many things about being an ALT. I was not confident in the classroom cause I felt that I was not yet ready for the role.

Excerpt 13 shows that the ALT was well-aware of her lack of experience and expertise at the beginning when it came to the job at hand, and thus had to rely on the JTE to assist her as she slowly got used to the role. Now while many Japanese teachers are friendly and accommodating like the one above, a few of them are not so forgiving as some of them simply refuse to consider ALTs as an equal in terms of classroom teaching (Shiobara, 2018). Such a situation is revealed in excerpt 14.

[Excerpt 14] I had a JTE in the past [when I was new] who did not communicate with me at all about her lessons after I was not able to follow the instructions she gave me last time. Instead, she just wanted me to pronounce vocabulary words and that is it.

In relation to the issue presented earlier, many ALTs are also aware about their lack of preparedness when it comes to teaching in the classroom (Smith, 2021). This is particularly true for new teachers who often have grievances about the fact that their training period was insufficient to prepare them for the actual task at hand, as portrayed in excerpt 15. JTEs easily recognize this, and while many do their best to help ALTs, some of them just choose to bear with it and give them minimal tasks in order to prevent any disruptions or conflicts in school.

[Excerpt 15] I don't think I am ready to teach [in elementary school] yet. I feel like the training period was not enough to prepare me for this [job]. I need more practice.

Additionally, many JTEs often complain about the lack of professionalism of some ALTs. Since the latter has little to no idea with regard to how to properly conduct themselves as teachers in Japan, the former are oftentimes upset with the way they act in school (Hiratsuka, 2023). Some of the unprofessional behaviors demonstrated by some ALTs include always being late to school, never calling in sick to the school or dispatch company and just suddenly being absent, being inattentive in class, and being unresponsive to the meeting with their JTEs, as shown in excerpts 16 and 17.

[Excerpt 16] One ALT got in trouble as he was always late in [arriving to] school, and when he was in school, he usually did not talk to anyone. The teachers were reportedly unhappy with this and decided to contact the BOE to complain about his behavior.

[Excerpt 17] I know this ALT who got a warning from the company because the school complained that he was absent at least three times without telling anyone and this caused so many [scheduling] problems for the teachers.

Another key issue is that many ALTs are oftentimes culturally insensitive which annoys many Japanese teachers in general, not just the JTE. By and large, Japanese people are uncomfortable in sharing information about their private life with others easily, especially in the workplace (Komisarof, 2010). However, some ALTs cross that line mainly due to their personality and cultural background. This then strains the relationship between both parties, which makes it difficult to do team-teaching, as can be observed in excerpt 18.

[Excerpt 18] I remember that was one time where I asked my JTE how his family was and he visibly got offended and he refused to talk to me for half a day. I was just trying to make small talk with him, that was why I was surprised about his reaction.

[Excerpt 19] My JTE was very friendly and we got along quite well, but I could sometimes feel her frustrations whenever she could not express herself in English. One time, she just outright told me if it was okay for her to speak [or explain her lesson plan] in Japanese.

Finally, one minor issue which JTEs have with regard to their ALTs is their lack of Japanese proficiency. One such scenario is shown in excerpt 19, that while the JTE was accommodating, the lack of the aforementioned language proficiency of the ALT made the conversation quite difficult for her. This corroborates with the fact that JTEs prefer ALTs to have some level of Japanese ability (Olson, 2019). Actually, even many ALTs themselves believe that having the ability to communicate in said language is essential for smooth communication (Aswe, De Castro, & Cainglet, 2023).

## Issues with Japanese Teachers of English

Aside from the glaring problems stated earlier with regard to ALTs, one particular issue that could be attributed to JTEs is that some of them are still befuddled about the actual roles of their foreign counterparts in the classroom (Miyazato, 2009). Despite this confusion, Japanese teachers have to think of multiple ways to include the ALTs in his or her lessons. Unfortunately, some JTEs found it difficult or sometimes even troublesome to do so. Instead, they have opted to limit the role of the ALT to just pronounce vocabulary words so as to not disrupt their teaching strategies too much. Such practices, in turn, demotivates migrant teachers from doing their work effectively as some might feel they are being disrespected, most especially if they are qualified educators (Higgins & Gulliford, 2014). This negative consequence has clearly been exhibited in excerpt 20.

[Excerpt 20] I used to be a [high school] teacher back in my country. I wanted to be involved in classroom activities with my JTE, but he just lets me stand in the corner all the time. I feel like I am just wasting my time. [That is why] I want to go back to being an elementary school ALT because at least there, I can be the T1, even though it is tiring.

Perhaps another possible explanation as to why many JTEs do not involve their ALTs too much in both the planning and execution phases of their lessons is that they are simply unsure on how to best incorporate their foreign teaching partners. Although JTEs receive monthly training in terms of collaborative or team-teaching with ALTs, many still find it quite difficult to consistently include their partners in the actual classroom teaching. This could mainly be attributed to their concerns regarding how to effectively teach different content material together with difficulties in using the appropriate teaching and evaluation methods (Inoue, 2014). One such difficulty can be seen in excerpt 21.

[Excerpt 21] My [relatively new] JTE told me that it is very difficult for her to balance between teaching the content of the lesson and doing activities with ALTs as they have to strictly follow the school curriculum.

The bias of a few Japanese teachers toward non-native speakers of English in particular is another factor that could hinder the relationship between them and their ALTs. The notion that the majority of JTEs, most especially at the high school level, prefer to have native speakers as their assistant teachers rather than their non-native counterparts is already an undeniable truth (Shibata, 2010; Chindemi, 2021). One such situation is portrayed in excerpt 22.

[Excerpt 22] I had a JTE that really wanted to have a native speaker as an ALT. He was friendly and did not openly suggest that he wanted to replace me, but when he heard that I was leaving my position, the first question he asked was if my replacement was a native speaker.

Due to this, many of them are inwardly discontented and disappointed whenever they are assigned to work with a non-native ALT. However, the majority of these migrant teachers are not from western countries, so this situation is quite difficult to deal with.

## Implications and recommendations

The teaching dynamic between JTEs and ALTs plays a significant role in student learning, especially in terms of raising international awareness as being exposed to the latter introduces different cultures and perspectives to them. That is why it is paramount for both sides to make consistent effort in maintaining a professional, if not friendly, relationship. However, while this

dynamic has improved over the years (Hiratsuka, 2023), the issues which were discussed above still often occur.

### **Team-Teaching**

In team-teaching, establishing rapport between the ALT and JTE is a crucial aspect that should be given more emphasis as this relationship dynamic significantly affects their collaboration inside the classroom. In fact, if both parties have high morale and are in-sync with one another, students would have a more positive learning environment as two teachers would be helping them learn in class (Baeten & Simons, 2014; Goldstein, 2015). For this reason, it is crucial for ALTs and JTEs to establish and maintain a healthy relationship, and this starts outside the classroom. It also helps if the ALT knows how to speak Japanese or is willing to learn it, as this could facilitate more natural interactions with the JTE, thus fostering a better connection and understanding between them (Escarda, 2024; Marasigan, 2024).

Another factor that was highlighted earlier was that many ALTs were only given a minor part in the lessons, most especially in the secondary education level. And for the vast majority of them, especially for those who have prior teaching experiences, being able to make a positive impact with regard to student learning keeps them motivated and driven to do more for the students (Meerman, 2003). Inversely, ALTs having a limited role often results in their disengagement and loss of self-confidence in the workplace. This, in turn, negatively affects their motivation which is vital to the success of language teaching, learning and communication (Ebata, 2008).

In light of this, it is necessary to provide more opportunities for ALTs to interact with the students, especially at the junior and senior high school level, since they can help not only in terms of language teaching, but also as cultural informants (Walter & Sponseller, 2020; Pearce, 2021). It therefore puts the onus on JTEs to be more creative in including their ALTs in their lessons. And this could be done through teacher training aimed at implementing teaching strategies that could better incorporate ALTs in the lessons. In truth, most ALTs prefer to be fully involved in the lessons as it keeps them engaged and motivated. Above all, it gives them the opportunity to constantly share their thoughts and experiences with the students.

A practical and effective way for JTEs to involve ALTs is to utilize the sequential teaching model as it ensures both teachers are given an equal amount of opportunity to teach and be responsible for their lessons (Carpenter, Crawford, & Walden, 2007; Dugan & Letterman, 2008). To implement this model, JTEs should dedicate at least half of one class each week for speaking activities wherein ALTs would be in charge of conducting the lesson at hand. This setup gives ALTs ample chances to engage with the students and be able to impart his or her knowledge to them through conversation practices and cultural exchanges. Additionally, it demonstrates the confidence of the JTE in the teaching abilities of his or her partner.

### **Teacher Training**

As for teacher training, ALTs, most especially new ones, should be given ample time and practice so that they could be more prepared to teach in the classroom. In fact, research shows that having longer teacher training programs often result in the development of more effective teaching techniques (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). This also enables them to better understand their duties and responsibilities so they could have a harmonious relationship with their JTEs. Most importantly, they would be able to build their confidence to do their tasks which, in turn, enhances their teaching performances (Giallo & Little, 2003). Currently, ALTs typically receive only one week of preparation before beginning their duties. To improve their readiness, it is recommended that this preparation period be extended into at least two weeks

or more, if necessary. Through this, they would be given more time to practice different teaching strategies in a controlled or simulated environment so that they can experience it firsthand themselves. This way, they would be able to develop more teaching skills so that they would be ready for the job.

Alternatively, to reduce financial costs, dispatch companies could require newly hired ALTs to watch videos outlining their roles, duties, and responsibilities in both the school and the community before they participate in the training program. Afterward, they should take a test to confirm their understanding of the video content. The test results would serve as a diagnostic tool as it would highlight areas where ALTs are struggling, enabling the companies to tailor their training programs to address the specific needs of their employees. Additionally, daily assessments should be done as these help trainers monitor the progress of ALTs. Moreover, they should be required to pass another test at the end of the training period. The test could include teaching strategies and practices covered in the program. These assessments and evaluations are essential to maximize the benefits of training (Kirkpatrick, 2007; Shenge, 2014).

Finally, many of the aforementioned issues stem from the fact that the MEXT was quite ambiguous with regard to the roles of both JTEs and ALTs in the classroom (Ohtani, 2010). This led to both sides having differing interpretations as to their duties and responsibilities. Thus, to address this situation, it is crucial for said government ministry to collaborate with both boards of education and dispatch companies and provide more detailed and specific information as to the roles of both JTEs and ALTs. This way, all parties involved would have a much clearer understanding about their respective job roles. These organizations could then incorporate this information into their teacher training programs, ensuring that all teachers are fully aware of their roles in the classroom. If done properly, this would lead to a more productive teacher collaboration which would then result in a more improved student outcomes in the classroom (Friend & Cook, 2010; Vangrieken et al., 2015).

## Conclusion

Despite the above-mentioned issues, it is evident that all parties involved including the government ministries, boards of education, schools, Japanese teachers of English and assistant language teachers are gradually moving toward the right direction. Having said that, most people are still adjusting to the roles that they have to do to make this reform a success. That is why it is paramount to continue improving to ensure that the plan would result in the betterment of students.

Teachers should always strive toward making sure that students learn as much as possible in the classroom. To make this a reality, both ALTs and JTEs need to consistently do their respective parts with regard to team-teaching. Such a situation could only happen through fostering good communication and relationships as well as strictly following the duties and responsibilities between two sides.

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