ASEAN Journal of Applied Linguistics

Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2025

ASJAL

ASEAN Journal of Applied Linguistics

https://ejournal.maal.org.my/asjal

Editorial Team

ASJAL | ASEAN Journal of Applied Linguistics

Website: https://ejournal.maal.org.my/asjal

eISSN 3009-0539

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Mapping Interactional Progression in Synchronous Online Discussions

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Abstract

Synchronous online group discussions are commonly recognized as a rich site for collaborative learning, where learners construct their understanding by actively participating to create a collective understanding. However, the interactional mechanics that support real-time collective understanding are under-explored. Understanding the complex range of learners' contributions has important implications for understanding the relationship between interaction and cognitive engagement. This study examines the internal mechanisms of knowledge construction in online discussions using the patterns of interaction and degree of linguistic complexity. A total of six video-recorded group sessions were transcribed. The complex analysis employed both an interactional framework and quantitative measures of lexical density. The results indicate that the early stages of group discussion segments tended to focus on background and shared information, often contributing most frequently to the knowledge construction process, but demonstrated relatively low lexical density as learners were largely negotiating shifting pieces of information. In contrast, segments that involved negotiation and critical evaluation occurred less frequently and suggested the proportion of richer content words, representing a higher cognitive engagement; while the stages of discussion mirrored a cyclical approach, with contributions constantly reviewed and reiterated to clarify ideas. The study contributes more broadly to understanding the relationship between the structure of discourse and richness of linguistic contribution in supporting collaborative learning. The study provides a practical metric for assessing cognitive depth, which can inform the development of automated feedback systems for facilitators. The integration of interactional and linguistic analysis offers practical underlining dynamics of online group discussions.

Keywords: online discussion, collaborative learning, interaction analysis, linguistic complexity, knowledge construction

Introduction

The rapid expansion of online learning has transformed higher education landscapes. It provides pivotal platforms for collaborative learning (Lowenthal, 2022; Camilleri & Camilleri, 2022). Digital learning has reshaped interactional mechanisms of shared dialogue and evolving understandings. Among these, online synchronous discussions are widely acknowledged for their potential to promote deeper collaboration (Maia et al., 2021). However, the efficacy of such environments depends on the quality and structure of interaction.

Despite growing interest in online collaborative learning, much remains unknown about the specific interactional processes through which learners build understanding together (Chen & He, 2023; Kamariah et al., 2023; Maqsood et al., 2024). Synchronous discussions, in particular, pose unique communicative and cognitive demands, requiring participants to coordinate

meaning and manage social dynamics collaboratively to build upon each other's ideas and create shared understanding (Lucas and Moreira 2010). While recent discourse-based studies have begun to explore these dynamics, most research continues to focus on macro-level outcomes. These studies offer limited insight into how knowledge is actually co-constructed during the flow of conversation. Fine-grained analyses of how learners initiate, sustain, and transform group dialogue are still scarce (Widdersheim, 2015; Azmat & Ahmad, 2022).

Real-time turn-taking, immediacy, and the absence of non-verbal cues create a unique interactional ecology that differs significantly from asynchronous forums. Synchronous discussions may provide a greater sense of focus and immediacy; however, the rapid pace of these discussions can also limit depth of reflection (Luo et al., 2023; Khilya et al., 2024). Simultaneously, reports of decreasing learner motivation and engagement (Almendingen et al., 2021; Chim et al., 2024) illustrate the inadequacy of conventional evaluative frameworks. These frameworks often do not include the operationalization of how knowledge is formed collaboratively in real-time talk.

This study aims to explore the internal structure of collaborative learning by analysing the interactional sequences and linguistic complexity of learners' contributions to synchronous online discussions. This study combines interactional analysis with lexical profiling to meaningfully highlight how or whether discourse which is happening in real-time, supports or constrains knowledge construction.

Literature Review

Interactional Framework for Collaborative Meaning-Making

Analyzing how learners co-construct meaning during synchronous online group discussions requires a theoretical approach. This theoretical approach must view discourse not only communication, but a socially situated context for learning. This study is anchored in an approach similar to sociocultural and discourse-interactional perspectives, with an emphasis on real-time interaction as a primary mechanism of collaborative meaning-making. Focal to this approach is Vygotsky's (1978) concept of socially mediated learning, which posits that development occurs through individuals dialogically engaging with more capable peers in a community while using culturally mediated semiotic tools. Lantolf and Poehner (2008) build on this concept by proposing that mediation is not only limited to formal instruction; it occurs dynamically, and thus, emergently, in spontaneous interaction. This is particularly pronounced in synchronous learning environments, in which learners are required to respond to ongoing discourse in the moment. Mercer and Littleton (2007) further this in arguing that shared understanding is dialogically constructed: learners negotiate, align, and adapt their understandings in communication, with little time to reflect after each interaction. The exchanges between learners are therefore, not only transactional, but also constitutive acts of joint reasoning.

Building on this, Smith's (1994) Group-Mediated Cognition (GMC) offers an interaction-centered view of learning as a collective, dialogic process. In this view, meaning is not constructed individually and then exchanged, but emerges through dialogic turns, where learners' contributions are built upon, reformulated, or reoriented by peers. The focus shifts from tracking isolated cognitive moves to analyzing how conceptual coherence is achieved collectively over time.

Informed by these perspectives, this study treats online group discussions as discursive events in which knowledge is collaboratively shaped through structured interaction. The emphasis is not on individual cognition, but on the participatory architecture of discussion, how learners

sustain focus, revisit ideas, and build alignment. Here, language functions not just as a means of expression, but as a tool for joint reasoning, scaffolding, and meaning alignment. The aim is to investigate how interactional sequences contribute to collaborative knowledge construction. Particular attention is given to the recursive and adaptive organization of dialogue in real-time, synchronous settings.

Empirical Perspectives on Online Group Discussions

Although research on online collaborative learning has expanded, it has predominantly centred on asynchronous platforms such as discussion forums and chatrooms to examine learning as a social process (Paulus, 2006; Lucas et al., 2014; de Laat & Lally, 2003). These studies often rely on surface-level indicators, such as message frequency, word count, and participation rates, that offer limited insight into the quality and depth of interaction (Tirthali & Murai, 2024; Widdersheim, 2015). More recent scholarship has called for the need to better understand how shared meaning is developed collaboratively (Chen & He, 2023; Kamariah et al., 2023). However, there remains a notable gap in research that closely examines real-time discourse practices in synchronous environments.

Gunawardena et al.'s (1997) Interaction Analysis Model (IAM) remains an important way to understand how learners construe knowledge over five recursive phases, from the sharing of information to the application of new knowledge. However, while the IAM can be helpful, it and other models face challenges in articulating the dynamic, recursive, habitually undertaken, and culturally mediated nature of synchronous discussions. In many studies, researchers observe learners remaining in the early phases of interaction, rarely appropriately negotiating and integrating (Ciampi et al., 2018; Lim & Park, 2023; Lucas et al., 2014). For instance, Paulus (2006), reported less than 10 percent of the contributions moved beyond the initial phase of sharing information, while Park et al. (2020) report limited movement even in "well-established" online learning contexts.

This study extends these findings by examining how phases of interactive behavior are achieved and sustained by repeated discourse sequences. Instead of looking at engagement from a lens of rate and type of participation, this study treats participation as an emergent property of an engagement structure. This includes both the interactional structure of participation and the linguistic complexity of learners' contributions, to examine or understand how learners manage or negotiate transitions between engagement phases. By accomplishing such a goal, we move beyond coding systems and can analyze both fluidly and in context how collaborative knowledge building occurs in synchronous discussions. This study seeks to offer a more nuanced interpretation of the Interaction Analysis Model (Gunawardena et al., 1997) by moving beyond phase-based frequency counts to explore the interactional dynamics and linguistic complexity that characterize each phase. In doing so, it responds to the limitations of earlier research (e.g., Ciampi et al., 2018; Lucas et al., 2014), which often equated learning progression with the quantity of contributions in each phase, rather than the quality and function of discourse within and across phases.

Methodology

Research Design

This investigation purports an explanatory instrumental case study framework to study collaborative learning, which occurs as a result of interactional dynamics resulting from

synchronous online group discussions (Merriam, 1988). This case study operates under a sociocultural and discourse-interactional theoretical framework within a bounded context, with Iraqi undergraduate learners. The explanatory intention will enable further understanding about how participants engage and maintain movement across interactional phases in real-time. In this case, the study will be primarily qualitative. It consists of a linguistic profiling which uses vocabulary density analysis to draw attention to the cognitive workload associated with opportunities for conversation at different levels of discourse. This combination of methodologies allows a dual focus on the structure and linguistics of collaboration, providing a detailed account of the meaning-making process, which has often been ignored in existing synchronous learning environment studies.

Participant Selection and Context

The study focuses on a purposive sample of 20 Iraqi undergraduate English majors enrolled in the Pedagogy and Curriculum Innovations course at a public university in Iraq. The participants, aged 21–23, were chosen based on their high level of engagement in synchronous online academic discussions. Criteria for selection were developed to ensure that the sample represents a typical microcosm of peer interaction in the given context, while also being manageable for deep qualitative analysis. The participants distributed into five per group, this number was deemed sufficient to reach data saturation within the context-specific exploration of interactional patterns. Pseudonyms (S1–S5) are used to protect participant confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data were generated through six synchronous discussion sessions conducted via Google Meet over a two-week period. They engaged in a discussion task developed collaboratively by the researcher and the course lecturer, focusing on the integration of learners' first language (L1) into English instruction. The task was designed to encourage critical engagement and elicit a range of perspectives. Participants responded to the guiding question: "Do you advocate for a strict English-only environment in second language learning, or should learners' first language be integrated into instruction?" This topic was selected for its pedagogical relevance and its potential to stimulate meaningful interaction aligned with the study's analytical aims. Google Meet was chosen for its accessibility and support for real-time, naturalistic communication. While technological issues can occasionally affect online interaction, potential disruptions were minimized through orientation sessions and participants' familiarity with the platform. All sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then reviewed and validated by the researcher to ensure accuracy.

Analytical Strategy

The analysis focused on the interactional and knowledge-construction dimensions of online group discussions, aiming to explore how participants developed shared understanding. Gunawardena et al.'s (1997) Interaction Analysis Model (IAM) was employed to categorize interaction phases and trace learners' progression from individual contributions to collective meaning-making (Table 1). To complement the interactional analysis, lexical density was examined to assess the linguistic complexity associated with each phase. Coding was conducted using Atlas.ti24, beginning with inductive category development and followed by theory-driven refinement. A second coder reviewed the coding scheme to enhance credibility, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Procedural talk (e.g., technical or logistical remarks) was excluded to ensure the analysis focused on content-relevant discourse.

Table 1: Interaction Analysis Model (Gunawardena et al., 1997)

Phase I: Sharing/Comparing of Information
A. A statement of observation or opinion
B. A statement of agreement from one or more other participants
C. Corroborating examples provided by one or more participants
D. Asking and answering questions to clarify details of statements
E. Definition, description, or identification of a problem

Phase II: The discovery and exploration of dissonance or inconsistency among ideas, concepts, or statements
A. Identifying and stating areas of disagreement
B. Asking and answering questions to clarify the source and extent of disagreement
C. Restating the participant's position

Phase III: Negotiation of meaning/co-construction of knowledge
A. Negotiation or clarification of the meaning of terms
B. Negotiation of the relative weight to be assigned to types of argument
C. Identification of areas of agreement or overlap among conflicting concepts
D. Proposal and negotiation of new statements embodying compromise, co-construction
E. Proposal of integrating or accommodating metaphors or analogies

Phase IV: Testing and modification of proposed synthesis or co-construction
A. Testing the proposed synthesis against ''received fact" as shared by the participants and/or their culture
B. Testing against existing cognitive schema
C. Testing against personal experience
D. Testing against formal data collected
E. Testing against contradictory testimony in the literature

Phase V: Agreement statement(s)
A. Summarisation of agreement(s)
B. Applications of new knowledge
C. Metacognitive statements by the participants illustrating their understanding
the conference interaction

Results

Interactional Dynamics in Online Discussions

This study examined how contribution sequences and structures influenced the collaborative construction of ideas in synchronous online discussions using Gunawardena et al.'s, (1997) Interaction Analysis Model (IAM). Data illustrated that interactional progression unfolded recursively rather than hierarchically, with participants' progression not consistently showing a linear or fixed order, as participants entered phase I sometimes moved to phase V, then returned to earlier phases. Phases emerged periodically rather than entrapped in a specified order.

The most prevalent phase of interaction occurred in phase I when participants were sharing ideas or exchanging general information. These segments played a conceptual supporting role to initiate and keep group conversation active. Far from demonstrating lack of interest or superficiality, this phase was simply a point of reference for the conversation in which participants could re-familiarize themselves with ideas, augment previous content, or keep the entire discussion aligned. Progressing into the next phases of construction, the phase of meaning negotiation and integration of ideas, was a long, progressive effort by participants. Individual participants did not share an experience of linear progression. Rather, discourse practices emerged and often returned for revisiting original contributions, using and reintroducing original contributions to support creating an evolving insight. For many participants, this entailed returning to original ideas to either revise and/or extend original ideas, which all contributed momentum to developing sharable knowledge.

Although higher-level phases occurred less frequently, they were marked by increased engagement with prior content and deeper exploration of perspectives. Transitions between phases were often facilitated by the cumulative nature of dialogue, in which ideas were not replaced but layered and reorganized through ongoing interaction. Some threads showed limited development beyond the early stages. In these cases, interaction remained at the level of information exchange, with few signs of integration or synthesis. However, even in such instances, the repetition of earlier phases served as a cohesive mechanism, supporting the overall continuity of group discussion.

These findings illustrate that the effectiveness of collaborative online discussions depends not on linear progression through predefined phases, but on the dynamic and recursive organization of contributions over time. The structure of interaction, including how often and how effectively participants re-engaged with prior content, played a critical role in shaping the trajectory and depth of group discussions.

Toward a Dynamic Understanding of the IAM

As illustrated in Figure 3, Phase I emerged as the most frequent phase across the discussions. Its dominance is not merely a result of frequent informational exchanges but signals its referential and organizational function within the broader structure of collaborative discourse. Although Phases II through V occurred with decreasing frequency, the interactional flow did not proceed in a strict linear order. Instead, the data revealed a cyclical and recursive pattern, with Phase I serving as a frequent point of return.

Transitions often began in Phase I, progressing through the subsequent phases. However, learners regularly looped back to Phase I, suggesting it served as an anchor point, a discursive space where participants revisited prior knowledge, clarified ideas, or re-established shared understanding before advancing. Rather than interpreting the recurrence of Phase I as a sign of shallow discussion, this pattern reflects the dynamic and iterative nature of collaboration in synchronous settings. The high recurrence of Phase I underscores its epistemic role: it functioned as a flexible zone for conceptual clarification and coherence maintenance, helping sustain movement across the interactional cycle. In this sense, Phase I acted as a mechanism of continuity rather than a ceiling to cognitive depth.
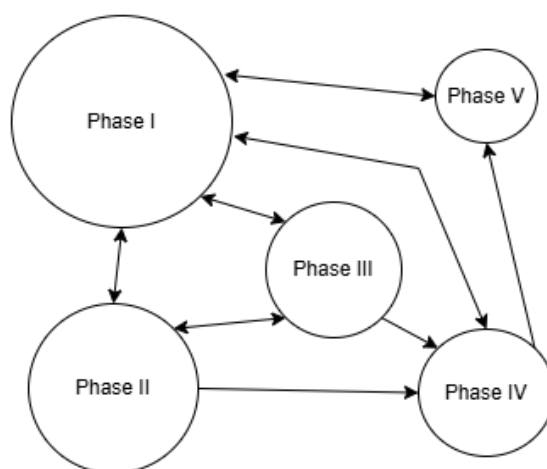
Figure 3. Distribution and Recurrence of Phases in the Interaction Analysis Model (IAM).

In addition to tracking phase frequency, the study examined lexical density across the IAM phases (see Figure 4). Lexical density, defined as the proportion of content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) relative to total word count, was analyzed using part-of-speech (POS) tagging in a basic natural language processing (NLP) framework.

Findings showed notable variation. Phase I, despite its dominance in frequency, had the lowest lexical density (44.6%), reflecting simpler language use and frequent referencing or re-anchoring. In contrast, Phases III and IV, associated with conceptual elaboration and negotiation, showed significantly higher lexical density (67.7% and 70%, respectively). This increase reflects the greater linguistic complexity and cognitive demand required in deeper discussion phases. The density patterns suggest that as learners move toward more conceptual engagement, their language becomes more content-rich, precise, and semantically dense.

Taken together, frequency and lexical density illuminate the complementary functions of different phases. Phase I, while structurally dominant, served as a foundational reference point that sustained the interactional rhythm. Phases III and V, though less frequent, showed greater cognitive intensity, marked by higher lexical complexity. These findings reinforce the value of integrating qualitative interactional analysis of learners' discussions across the five phases with quantitative linguistic profiling to uncover how discourse patterns reflect cognitive engagement, not only through structural movement across phases, but also through the richness of the language used.
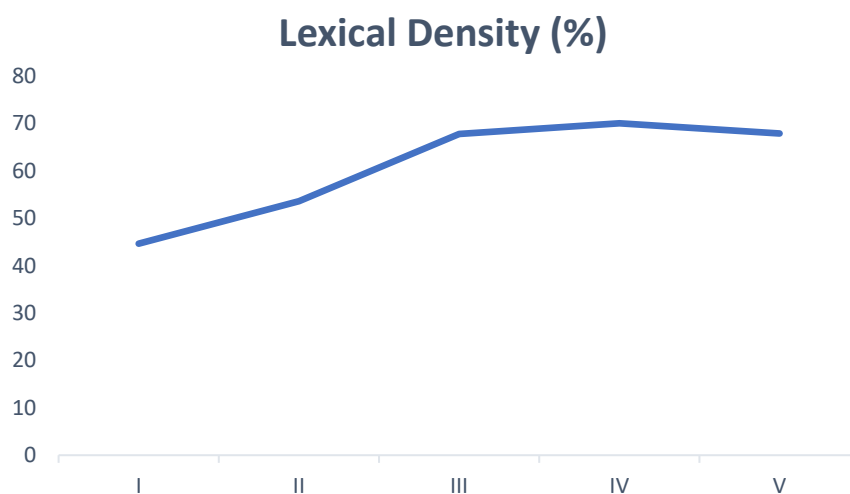
Figure 4. Lexical Density across IAM phases

Discussion

This study examined the interactional process and linguistic features of synchronous online discussions through Gunawardena et al.'s (1997) Interaction Analysis Model (IAM) and a lexical density analysis. Our analysis showed a dynamic and recursive movement through the IAM phases. Phase I, Sharing/Comparing of Information was noted more frequently from participants for conceptual clarification and maintaining coherence and connectionit had a much lower lexical density than the other phases. Phases III, Negotiation of Meaning and IV, Testing and Modification of Proposed Synthesis had a much higher lexical density than the other phases, to show more linguistic complexity and more cognitive demand from the three

readings. From our findings, it is evident that there are complementary functions in all the interactional phases when considering collaborative knowledge construction and interaction in an online environment. Both the structural shift across the phases and the language used within the phases certainly come together to make a contribution related to cognitive engagement.

Non-Linearity and Recursiveness in IAM Progression

Similar to our observation of the occurrence of phases in online dialogue occurring in a circular, repeated process, with frequent returns to Phase I, is consistent with and extends research on collaborative knowledge construction. While Gunawardena et al. (1997) sketched a linear trajectory through the five phases, subsequent research has found many examples of the non-linear, recursive nature of online interactions (Mohamed and Abdallah, 2021). They found that online learning participants do not follow each phase linearly in a strict process. They often return to Phase I to clarify understanding, or re-establish common ground, before moving on to complex and higher-order knowledge construction.

This recursive pattern is significant. In particular, the nature of anchoring Phase I roles suggests that the construction of information-sharing is not just an initial step, but a continuous process. This process is important for sustaining collaborative dialogue and ultimately for group members' collective understanding of the topic or subject of learning, if achieved at all, mostly in dynamic synchronous settings. This finding shows the need to avoid rigidly interpreting the IAM as a strictly linear model. Instead, a more adaptable understanding of the model better characterize the findings in this study with an adaptable and fluid understanding of its use to analyze higher-level collaborative knowledge construction in online interactions. This challenge earlier interpretations (Ciampi et al., 2018; Lim & Park, 2023; Lucas et al., 2014) in which participants contributions were normally evaluated only by the quantity of contributions, in each phase of the Gunawardena et al.'s (1997) model. Nevertheless, this more recent work by Campeny et al. (2018) and Lim and Park (2023), gives further credence to this non-linear approach indicating that knowledge construction is an inherently iterative process when it occurs in online environments (Aldulaimi et al 2018; Mohamed and Abdallah, 2021).

Lexical Density and Cognitive Engagement

The differences in lexical density in the IAM phases provide new perspectives about the cognitive demands and linguistic features associated with the various stages of collaborative knowledge construction. By examining lexical density in the IAM phases, this study illustrates how the form of language (i.e. its complexity) parallels the function of interaction (i.e. its cognitive purpose). This enhances our understanding of how learners think and communicate to build knowledge in online environments.

The low lexical density in Phase I (44.6%) indicates a proclivity for less complex, and more straightforward language, which is presumably to promote transactional exchange of information and clarification. There are significant differences in lexical density in Phases III (67.7%) and IV (70%), which are linked to cognitive elaboration, meaning-making and synthesis. Moreover, the pattern is evident that as learners engage in increasingly complex cognitive processes, their language becomes both more content dense and semantically rich. The observation is aligned with previous studies (Gatiyatullina & Solnyshkina, 2020; Zhou et al 2023; Qin & Wen, 2023) into linguistic complexity in academic discourse suggesting that higher lexical density provides the most formal, informative and cognitively challenging texts.

There is little evidence in the literature which directly studies the notion of lexical density across the phases of the IAM. However, studies on other linguistic aspects of the movement between, for instance, coherence and collaboration, across the medium of online discussions correspond to increased linguistic complexity, defined as more extensive, and aspect of higher order thinking and therefore knowledge construction. For example, Jahromi (2020) observed that placing students in online discussions developed their lexical variation, richness, and density. In another study, Laat and Lally (2004) observed that online discussion allows for a developmental pattern of higher order thinking, usually reflected through more complex and denser lexicon (Al-Shami et al., 2022). Though De Laat and Lally (2004) noted that online discussion facilitated higher-order thinking, as measured by lexical richness, their analysis was not based upon an interactional framework. The present study compares lexical density across the specific stages of the Gunawardena et al. (1997) phases, providing a more accurate account of linguistic complexity as it develops through real-time collaborative learning. Our understanding of the distinctions between the moving phases of IAM is enriched through proposed mappings to linguistic transitions, as well as conversations to linguistic transitions. Distinctly, we are able to assign a quantitative linguistic abstraction to qualitative descriptions of experience through the mapping of the IAM cognitive phases in developing cognitive engagement through discourse building. This approach enables us to go beyond mere positioning or structure of a phase into descriptive movement through a rich use of language.

This study offers more than an endorsement of the non-linearity inherent in IAM phases and the relevance of lexical density. For practitioners, it should be emphasised that the overlapping of Phase I should not be, nor is it likely to be, interpreted as a lack of progress, rather it should be understood as a deliberate and purposeful return to enhance collective understanding of the group in the study of qualitative knowledge development. By designing prompts that require iterative clarification participants may develop a deeper knowledge that extends beyond factual knowledge construction. It is possible that lexical density could also be used as a real-time indicator of whether knowledge construction is taking place in learning spaces in asynchronous or synchronous online settings. This possibility may also encourage the consideration of developing automated tools that monitor the complexity of language used in on-line discussions and alert educators when prolonged periods of shallow discussion occur. The most recent work of Chen and He (2023) that sought to evaluate AI discussions as a linguistic diagnostics device could provide support for this consideration. For researchers, new possibilities emerge, such as quantifying cognitive depth when we include linguistic metrics (i.e., lexical density) in IAM-based research. For example, studies could examine elements of syntactic complexity, hedging, or structures of argument with respect to phase transitions, or how cross-cultural influences may shape participants' understandings of culturally conditioned discourse practices (e.g. through Arabic or Western styles) that may advance or hinder learners' progress through IAM. Kamal et al.'s (2023) comparative research sets an excellent backdrop for this investigation.

Conclusion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of interactional dynamics in synchronous online discussions, demonstrating the recursive nature of collaborative knowledge construction within the IAM framework and establishing lexical density as a quantitative indicator of cognitive engagement. The study has illuminated how both the structural movement through discussion phases and the richness of language contribute to knowledge construction. These findings offer valuable insights for designing more effective online learning environments and pave the way for future research into the complex interplay of interaction, language, and cognition in digital

collaborative spaces. Specifically, the observed non-linear progression through IAM phases highlights the adaptive nature of collaborative learning, suggesting that educators should embrace iterative processes rather than strictly linear ones. The study provides a practical metric for assessing cognitive depth, which can inform the development of automated feedback systems for facilitators.

Implications

This study yields important implications for theory, pedagogy, and future research in online collaborative learning, especially within culturally specific and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts.

The findings highlight that meaningful collaboration is not solely a function of participation frequency, but of how learners navigate interactional phases and develop linguistic complexity over time. Phase I's frequent recurrence, often misinterpreted as superficial, was shown to play a pivotal epistemic role in sustaining coherence and realigning shared understanding. Educators should therefore embrace rather than discourage such recursive practices. Instructional design should integrate tasks that promote cyclical refinement of ideas, allowing learners to revisit and deepen understanding over multiple turns.

Moreover, the correlation between higher lexical density and advanced phases of knowledge construction suggests that linguistic richness can serve as a real-time proxy for cognitive engagement. Practitioners can harness this insight by designing prompts and activities that require elaboration, synthesis, and perspective-taking, discursive actions known to foster density and deeper reasoning.

By mapping interactional sequences to lexical density patterns, this study introduces a novel methodological synergy that enriches existing discourse analysis frameworks. The integration of the Interaction Analysis Model (IAM) with natural language processing-based lexical profiling enables both structural and semantic dimensions of knowledge construction to be captured. This dual-layered approach not only enhances analytic precision but opens pathways for automated assessment tools that can monitor interactional quality and signal stagnation or conceptual drift in real time.

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Research Capacity Building and Overcoming Communication Challenges: Insights from a Multi-Country Erasmus+ CBHE Project

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Abstract

This study examines how the Building Social Research Capacity in Higher Education Institutions in Lao PDR and Malaysia (BRECIL) Erasmus[+] CBHE Project strengthened research capacity while navigating multilingual communication challenges. The consortium comprised seven partners: two from Malaysia, two from Laos, and three from Europe (the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden). Within this multilingual context, the study addressed three questions: (i) How did the project build institutional and individual research capacity? (ii) What language and communication barriers constrained collaboration? (iii) Which strategies supported effective knowledge exchange? Using a qualitative approach, data were drawn from project reports, interviews with academic staff, and participant reflections. Thematic analysis highlighted processes of capacity building, academic communication, and cross-cultural collaboration. Findings indicate that the project enhanced institutional structures, improved staff skills in academic writing and digital methods, and created opportunities for international collaboration. Challenges included limited English proficiency, low confidence in publishing, and intercultural communication gaps. Yet the consortium's linguistic diversity enriched discussions and promoted intercultural learning. Writing workshops, mentoring in publication, and structured language support were particularly effective in reducing barriers to academic writing, publishing, and cross-cultural communication. The study concludes that research capacity building in multilingual partnerships should integrate linguistic and intercultural support. It demonstrates how Erasmus[+] collaborations can strengthen research culture while transforming linguistic diversity into a resource for innovation and sustainable academic development.

Keywords: communication challenges, research capacity building, higher education, sustainable development

Introduction

Global higher education is increasingly shaped by multilingual and transnational collaboration. Within this evolving landscape, language and communication—core concerns of applied linguistics—serve not only as tools for research but also as drivers of inclusion, sustainability, and innovation. The rise of international consortia, digital knowledge exchange, and cross-

border partnerships has transformed how universities conceptualize capacity building and academic development (Knight, 2020; Tran & Nguyen, 2022). Such collaborations depend on more than funding and infrastructure; they rely on shared understanding across linguistic and cultural boundaries, making communication a central determinant of success (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012).

The European Union's Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) programme exemplifies this global shift. Designed to strengthen the modernisation and internationalisation of higher education institutions (HEIs) in partner countries, CBHE projects aim to foster institutional resilience, human capital development, and intercultural exchange (European Commission, 2022). These projects often involve partners from both Europe and Asia, creating contexts rich in linguistic and cultural diversity. Yet, despite their increasing prominence, the communicative dimensions of such collaborations—how partners negotiate meaning, share knowledge, and co-construct understanding—remain underexplored in research on international higher education.

This paper focuses on one such initiative: the Building Social Research Capacity in Higher Education Institutions in Lao PDR and Malaysia (BRECIL) project, which ran from 2017 to 2021. The project involved seven partners: two from Malaysia, two from Laos, and three from Europe (the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden). Its overarching goal was to enhance social research capacity through training, mentoring, and the digitalisation of research processes. In practice, BRECIL sought to build institutional structures for research governance, strengthen academic writing and publication competencies, and promote sustainable collaboration across partner universities. Alongside these objectives, the project confronted a persistent yet productive challenge: multilingual communication in transnational academic settings.

In this respect, BRECIL presents a compelling case for examining how applied linguistics intersects with development cooperation and higher education reform. While institutional strengthening and research training are critical, language practices and communication dynamics often determine the inclusiveness and sustainability of capacity-building outcomes. As Canagarajah (2013) and Flowerdew (2019) argue, English has become the de facto lingua franca of academia, but its dominance can also reproduce linguistic inequalities and marginalize voices from non-Anglophone contexts. Within the BRECIL consortium, participants from Malaysia and Laos engaged with European partners through English as a working language, creating both opportunities for mutual learning and challenges related to proficiency, confidence, and intercultural communication.

The study is guided by three key questions:

1. How did the project build institutional and individual research capacity?

2. What language and communication barriers constrained collaboration?

3. Which strategies supported effective knowledge exchange?

Through these questions, the study situates applied linguistics within the broader agenda of international development and academic cooperation, emphasizing that communication is not peripheral but constitutive of capacity building itself. By examining how multilingual teams co-create meaning and negotiate research knowledge, the paper contributes to understanding how linguistic diversity can evolve from a challenge into a resource for sustainable academic development.

Theoretical Orientation

This study draws on two complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Constructivism and Communities of Practice (CoP). Social Constructivism, derived from the work of Vygotsky (1978), posits that knowledge is not transmitted but constructed through social interaction and shared meaning-making. Learning and capacity building, in this view, occur within collaborative activities where participants engage in dialogue, negotiation, and reflection. In multilingual settings, this process becomes especially complex and meaningful, as language itself mediates how knowledge is created and interpreted (Lantolf, 2000).

The Communities of Practice framework (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) complements this view by highlighting how groups of practitioners develop shared repertoires, norms, and understandings through sustained interaction. Within a community of practice, learning is situated in which it arises from participation in joint projects and mutual engagement. In the BRECIL context, the consortium functioned as a community of practice where European, Malaysian, and Lao academics collaborated across linguistic and cultural differences to co-construct research capacity. This lens allows exploration of how communication practices, formal and informal, shaped the learning community, revealing how participants navigated asymmetries of power, language, and institutional expertise.

Together, these theoretical perspectives position research capacity building as both a cognitive and communicative process. They underscore that capacity is developed not simply through workshops or training sessions, but through dialogue, collaboration, and mutual understanding, all mediated by language and culture. Thus, language becomes both a medium and a metaphor for transformation: it connects institutions, bridges disciplinary and national boundaries, and enables the joint creation of knowledge.

Relevance and Contribution

This study is aligned with the MAALIC 2025 theme, *"Applied Linguistics for Global Challenges: Sustainability, Inclusion, and Innovation."* It foregrounds how applied linguistics offers tools and insights to address practical issues of communication, equity, and participation in international higher education. While many capacity-building projects report on measurable outcomes—such as improved research policies or increased publication rates—few critically examine the linguistic and intercultural processes through which such outcomes are achieved. By doing so, this paper expands the scope of applied linguistics to include the sociolinguistic realities of collaboration, especially in Southeast Asian contexts where multilingualism and power differentials in English use are highly salient.

Moreover, the study contributes empirically by documenting the strategies used within BRECIL to bridge communication gaps: structured writing workshops, mentoring schemes, translanguaging practices, and the use of digital tools for asynchronous communication. Analytically, it contributes by theorising the intersection between capacity building and communicative practice, showing how these two domains co-evolve. Conceptually, it challenges the notion of language as a barrier, proposing instead that linguistic diversity can be harnessed as a driver of creative collaboration and intercultural learning (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012).

Ultimately, this paper argues that sustainable international partnerships depend on linguistic equity, communicative competence, and intercultural sensitivity. As higher education becomes increasingly globalised, the ability to collaborate effectively across languages and cultures becomes a fundamental component of research capacity itself. Thus, this study not only documents a project outcome but also advances a broader argument: that language is central to building resilient, inclusive, and innovative research ecosystems in the Global South and beyond.

Literature Review

Research Capacity Building in Higher Education

Research capacity building (RCB) has emerged as a central theme in international higher education, particularly in developing and transitional contexts. It refers to the systematic strengthening of the skills, infrastructure, and institutional culture necessary for sustainable research performance (Cooke, 2005). According to Tight (2018), RCB encompasses individual and collective competencies that enable universities to generate, manage, and disseminate knowledge effectively. In developing regions, where resources and research culture may be unevenly distributed, capacity building aims to redress structural inequalities and promote global participation in knowledge production (Mukherjee & Wong, 2020).

Within the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) framework, projects are designed to support higher education institutions (HEIs) in aligning with international standards while maintaining local relevance. These projects often target areas such as curriculum reform, governance, digital transformation, and research development (European Commission, 2022). As Tran and Nguyen (2022) observe, capacity building in such settings transcends technical skill acquisition; it involves building institutional environments that nurture academic inquiry, critical reflection, and intercultural understanding.

In practice, however, RCB is not a neutral process. Power asymmetries between Northern and Southern partners, linguistic hierarchies, and differing academic traditions can shape the nature of collaboration (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). While European partners often bring established systems and publication cultures, Asian partners contribute contextual knowledge, local engagement, and adaptability. Successful capacity building therefore requires mutuality, reciprocity, and dialogue (Cartwright & Bovill, 2020). It depends on building trust and shared understanding—processes that are inherently communicative and often linguistically mediated.

Language, Multilingualism, and Communication in International Collaboration

Language plays a central role in transnational higher education partnerships. It is both a medium of communication and a symbol of inclusion or exclusion. English has become the dominant lingua franca of academia, serving as the primary language for research dissemination, publishing, and collaboration (Jenkins, 2015; Mauranen, 2012). While this dominance facilitates global connectivity, it also reinforces linguistic inequalities, often privileging native or near-native speakers and marginalising others (Flowerdew, 2019).

For scholars from non-Anglophone contexts, limited proficiency in academic English can constrain participation in international projects and publishing networks (Curry & Lillis, 2018). As a result, language functions as a gatekeeper to academic visibility and legitimacy. Mauranen (2012) notes that communication in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) contexts involves constant negotiation of meaning, where speakers adjust, accommodate, and co-construct understanding across linguistic differences. This dynamic, while challenging, can also foster linguistic innovation and intercultural empathy.

Applied linguistics research has increasingly explored the concept of translanguaging—the flexible and dynamic use of multiple linguistic resources within interaction (Canagarajah, 2013). In international projects, translanguaging allows participants to draw on their full linguistic repertoires to clarify complex ideas, build rapport, and create shared meanings. García and Wei (2014) argue that translanguaging not only facilitates communication but also repositions multilingualism as an asset rather than a deficiency. In multilingual consortia like

BRECIL, such practices can transform potential barriers into opportunities for creative negotiation and inclusive participation.

Intercultural communication competence is another key factor shaping collaboration. Deardorff (2016) defines this competence as the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural contexts, grounded in attitudes of openness, curiosity, and respect. Within academic partnerships, this competence underpins how participants interpret feedback, engage in joint decision-making, and manage conflict. Misalignment in communication styles, such as directness, deference, or turn-taking, can lead to misunderstanding or perceived imbalance (Holliday, 2011). Thus, successful capacity building depends not only on linguistic proficiency but also on intercultural sensitivity and relational awareness.

Communication and Power in Transnational Higher Education

Language in international collaboration is inseparable from questions of power, identity, and epistemic inequality. Phillipson (2017) and Pennycook (2018) highlight that English dominance in global academia mirrors broader patterns of knowledge colonisation, where Western epistemologies and linguistic norms often define what counts as "quality" research. This can result in asymmetrical relationships between partners, where those from the Global South may internalise deficit perspectives about their linguistic or scholarly capacity.

Scholars such as Canagarajah (2013) and Kubota (2020) call for a more plurilingual and decolonial orientation in academic collaboration—one that values diverse ways of knowing and communicating. In practice, this means recognising the legitimacy of different Englishes, local languages, and discursive styles within international research. For projects like BRECIL, this perspective is particularly relevant: participants from Laos and Malaysia bring distinct linguistic and cultural capital that enrich rather than dilute the collaborative process.

Language also intersects with institutional culture and professional identity. In academic communities, how one writes, speaks, and presents knowledge reflects one's epistemological stance and disciplinary belonging (Hyland, 2019). In cross-cultural teams, divergent norms regarding hierarchy, critique, and authorship can influence participation. For instance, participants from collectivist cultures may show deference to senior researchers, while European counterparts may expect more assertive dialogue. Without awareness of these differences, communication gaps can emerge, subtly shaping who speaks, who leads, and whose knowledge is foregrounded (Tange & Lauring, 2009).

Theoretical Perspectives: Social Constructivism and Communities of Practice

The theoretical grounding for this study lies in Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf, 2000) and Communities of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Both perspectives illuminate the social nature of learning and collaboration in multilingual academic environments.

From a social constructivist standpoint, knowledge is co-created through interaction, dialogue, and shared activity. Learning occurs as participants engage with one another, negotiate meaning, and internalise new understandings within a social context. In a multilingual project like BRECIL, this process is mediated by language, which acts as both a cognitive tool and a cultural bridge. As Lantolf (2000) explains, language enables learners to articulate and refine thought; through collaborative communication, they construct shared frameworks of understanding.

The Communities of Practice framework offers a complementary perspective. Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualise learning as situated within a community where members share

goals and engage in mutual learning. Participation is a continuum—from peripheral observation to full engagement—as individuals gradually acquire competence and confidence. In BRECIL, European, Malaysian, and Lao partners formed such a community through workshops, mentoring, and digital collaboration. Over time, shared repertoires of practice—writing conventions, feedback styles, and communication norms—emerged, exemplifying Wenger's (1998) assertion that learning is a socially negotiated process.

Integrating these frameworks allows us to understand research capacity building as both a cognitive and communicative enterprise. Capacity is not transferred from one partner to another but co-constructed through ongoing dialogue and reflection. This approach shifts the focus from "training recipients" to active participants in a joint learning process, thereby aligning with contemporary views of equitable and inclusive international collaboration (Tran & Nguyen, 2022).

Gaps in the Literature and the Present Study

Although extensive research exists on capacity building and internationalisation in higher education, few studies explicitly examine the linguistic and communicative dimensions of research partnerships. Most literature on Erasmus+ and similar programmes highlights structural achievements—such as enhanced governance, improved curricula, and increased publication output (European Commission, 2022)—but seldom analyses how everyday communication practices shape those outcomes.

Moreover, studies that do address language issues often treat them as secondary challenges rather than as central to the process of collaboration (Cartwright & Bovill, 2020). There remains a need for empirical accounts that explore how multilingual communication affects knowledge exchange, identity negotiation, and equity in capacity building. In Southeast Asia, where linguistic diversity and varying English proficiency levels are the norm, this inquiry is particularly timely (Nguyen & Burns, 2017).

The present study addresses these gaps by investigating how the BRECIL Erasmus+ project strengthened research capacity while navigating multilingual communication challenges. It contributes to the literature by (i) highlighting the communicative dimensions of capacity building, (ii) demonstrating how multilingualism can be a resource rather than a constraint, and (iii) proposing strategies for fostering inclusive, linguistically aware collaboration in international higher education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how multilingual collaboration unfolded within the *Building Social Research Capacity in Higher Education Institutions in Lao PDR and Malaysia (BRECIL)* consortium. A qualitative case study approach was chosen because it allows for in-depth examination of social processes within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). Given that BRECIL involved complex, culturally diverse interactions across institutional and national boundaries, this design enabled the researcher to capture nuanced experiences, communication dynamics, and capacity-building outcomes as they evolved over time.

Case studies are particularly suitable for projects where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred (Stake, 2005). In this instance, language practices, institutional culture, and research development were deeply interwoven. Rather than attempting to isolate variables, the study aimed to understand how participants constructed meaning through interaction and

how multilingual communication shaped the collaborative process. The qualitative orientation aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which values participants' subjective perspectives and social realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Case Context

BRECIL was a European Union–funded Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education (CBHE) project implemented between 2017 and 2021. The consortium comprised seven partner institutions: two from Malaysia, two from the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and three from Europe (the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden). The project's overarching objective was to strengthen institutional and individual capacities for social science research through training, mentoring, digitalisation, and policy development.

In practice, this entailed a range of collaborative activities, including capacity-building workshops, online mentoring sessions, joint research training modules, and evaluation meetings. English was the main working language, yet participants also used Lao, Malay, and occasionally German or Dutch in internal exchanges and informal communication. This multilingual reality provided fertile ground for examining how linguistic and cultural diversity intersected with research capacity building.

Data Sources

Data were drawn from multiple documentary and experiential sources, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the consortium's processes and outcomes. The study primarily analysed textual and reflective materials produced during the life of the project, complemented by insights from selected interviews and participant feedback.

1. Project documentation:

A rich corpus of internal documents—including progress reports, training materials, meeting minutes, and evaluation records—was reviewed. These materials provided evidence of how institutional strategies evolved, how capacity-building priorities were set, and how communication practices were negotiated among partners. The documents were particularly valuable in tracing the longitudinal development of collaborative mechanisms and the institutionalisation of research support systems.

2. Semi-structured interviews:

To complement documentary analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten academic staff from Laos and Malaysia, and three European partners involved in training and coordination. These participants represented various academic roles—administrators, project coordinators, and workshop facilitators—offering diverse perspectives on collaboration. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person and lasted between 45 and 70 minutes. The flexible format allowed participants to reflect on communication experiences, challenges, and perceived gains in research capacity.

3. Participant reflections:

The study also drew on reflective accounts embedded in post-activity reports and workshop evaluations. These reflections provided first-hand narratives of intercultural interaction, language negotiation, and learning moments. While not all reflections were systematically solicited, they offered spontaneous insight into participants' evolving understanding of multilingual collaboration and inclusion.

This multi-source design ensured that both formal and informal dimensions of the consortium's communication were captured, supporting a holistic interpretation of the data.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis, which is well suited to exploring patterns within qualitative data. The six stages—familiarisation, coding, theme generation, theme review, definition, and reporting— were applied iteratively to ensure analytic depth and coherence.

Initially, all documents and interview transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity and to identify recurrent ideas related to research capacity development, communication barriers, and collaborative strategies. Coding was conducted inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing pre-existing categories. Codes were then grouped into broader themes reflecting how language and communication practices shaped the consortium's functioning.

Triangulation across documentary, interview, and reflective sources enhanced the reliability and validity of findings (Denzin, 2012). For example, patterns observed in reports—such as changes in institutional reporting standards—were cross-checked against interview accounts and workshop reflections. Divergent cases were examined carefully to ensure that the analysis represented the full complexity of the multilingual collaboration. NVivo software was used to manage and code textual data systematically.

The interpretive process remained reflexive: the researcher continuously reflected on positionality as an observer interpreting multilingual communication within a transnational partnership. This reflexivity helped mitigate potential bias and promoted transparency in the analytic process (Finlay, 2012).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional research ethics committee. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all interviewees. To protect confidentiality, all names of individuals and institutions have been anonymised or replaced with pseudonyms. Data were stored securely, and only aggregated results are reported.

Given the small and interconnected nature of the consortium, maintaining anonymity required particular care in how quotations were presented. Descriptive details that might inadvertently identify participants were removed or generalised. The ethical stance of the research was guided by the principles of respect, beneficence, and transparency, consistent with standard qualitative research ethics (BERA, 2018).

Trustworthiness and Rigour

To ensure credibility and rigour, the study employed multiple strategies. Triangulation across data types (documents, interviews, reflections) supported a richer and more trustworthy interpretation of findings. Member checking was carried out informally by sharing preliminary insights with selected participants, allowing them to verify accuracy and contribute further context. Thick description was used to convey the social and linguistic nuances of the consortium, facilitating transferability to similar cross-cultural educational projects (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail documenting analytic decisions, data sources, and coding iterations. This systematic approach enhances transparency and allows

others to follow the interpretive process. Reflexive memos were also maintained throughout the analysis to capture evolving thoughts and theoretical insights.

Limitations

As a qualitative case study, the findings are context-specific and not intended for broad generalisation. The study focused primarily on documentation and participant perspectives from the BRECIL consortium; therefore, its insights should be interpreted as illustrative rather than definitive. Furthermore, the reliance on English-language materials may have limited access to some local-level communication in Lao or Malay. Nevertheless, the inclusion of diverse data types and the triangulated design provide a strong foundation for understanding how multilingual communication mediates capacity building in transnational higher education partnerships.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and interprets the findings according to the study's three guiding questions:

1. How did the project build institutional and individual research capacity?

2. What language and communication barriers constrained collaboration?

3. Which strategies supported effective knowledge exchange?

A cross-cutting theme, linguistic diversity as a resource, is discussed as an emerging dimension that reshaped the consortium's understanding of collaboration.

Building Institutional and Individual Research Capacity

The BRECIL project strengthened both institutional structures and individual competencies in research across the participating universities. Thematic analysis of project documents and interviews revealed three main mechanisms: (i) structured training and mentoring, (ii) digitalisation of research processes, and (iii) enhancement of institutional support systems.

Structured Training and Mentoring

BRECIL's training workshops focused on key areas such as academic writing, ethics, research methodology, and digital data management. Participants from Laos and Malaysia particularly valued mentoring sessions led by European partners, which provided exposure to international research norms and publishing practices. One Lao participant noted:

"Before BRECIL, research writing was something distant for us. We learned how to structure a paper, how to respond to reviewers. It built our confidence and gave us a sense that we could also publish internationally." *(Lao lecturer, Interview 3)*

Mentorship functioned as both skill transfer and identity development. European trainers emphasized collaborative reflection rather than one-way instruction, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist principle that learning occurs through guided participation. Over time, mentees internalized new academic practices, and several institutions reported an increase in research proposals and publications by project completion (BRECIL Report, 2021).

Digitalisation of Research Processes

Digital capacity-building workshops facilitated by European partners introduced new data collection and management tools. These interventions not only modernized administrative

systems but also supported remote collaboration—a vital adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a Malaysian project coordinator commented:

"The move to online research management was a big step. It made our reporting more transparent, and it allowed us to connect with our Lao partners more frequently. We learned new ways to sustain collaboration even when borders were closed." *(Coordinator, Malaysia, Interview 4)*

The introduction of digital tools thus catalyzed a shift from project-based cooperation to more sustained institutional partnerships, a finding consistent with recent studies on Erasmus+ project sustainability (Tran & Nguyen, 2022).

Institutional Support and Research Culture

The project's influence extended beyond individuals to institutional reform. Documents indicated that several universities established internal research committees or policy frameworks for ethics review. In Laos, for instance, BRECIL provided templates for research proposals and structured peer review, which were later adopted across faculties. The consolidation of such structures demonstrates how capacity building became institutionalized, echoing Knight's (2020) view that sustainable internationalisation depends on embedding practices within governance systems.

Overall, BRECIL's approach reflects constructivist and participatory learning principles: capacity was not delivered but co-created. This aligns with Wenger's (1998) concept of *communities of practice*, where collective participation fosters both competence and belonging.

Communication Barriers in Multilingual Collaboration

Despite these achievements, participants frequently cited language and communication challenges as significant obstacles to smooth collaboration. These barriers occurred at multiple levels, namely, linguistic, intercultural, and technological.

English Proficiency and Linguistic Confidence

English served as the lingua franca, but varying levels of proficiency influenced participation. Lao and Malaysian partners often reported anxiety during formal meetings or while drafting documents. One Lao academic explained:

"When we had to present in English, I was stressed. I felt nervous. Sometimes, yes we do understood the content, but it was hard to express ideas so fast, it looks like so much time everybody is looking at you, waiting to listen what you are going to say, especially online." *(Lao participant, Interview 5)*

This sentiment resonates with Flowerdew's (2019) discussion of linguistic inequality in global academic publishing, where non-native speakers face additional cognitive load and affective barriers. European partners acknowledged this asymmetry but also viewed it as an opportunity for empathy and adaptation:

"We learned to slow down, to rephrase. It was not just about teaching research—it was about listening and understanding across accents and levels. Needed to listen very carefully and requires a extra attention " *(European trainer, Interview 2)*

Such mutual adjustment reflects Jenkins's (2015) notion of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), where communication success depends less on grammatical accuracy than on pragmatic accommodation and shared understanding.

Intercultural Communication and Hierarchical Norms

Cultural expectations regarding hierarchy and communication also influenced interactions. Participants from Southeast Asia tended to defer to European counterparts in decision-making or academic debates. One Malaysian partner described:

"Sometimes we hesitated before disagreeing because we didn't want to look impolite. But later, slowly, slowly as we became more confident, we began to feel more at ease, more confident." *(Malaysian participant, Interview 8)*

This gradual shift toward egalitarian dialogue illustrates the development of trust within the consortium. Drawing on Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions, the movement from high- to lower-power distance interactions signaled growing intercultural competence—a key indicator of capacity building (Deardorff, 2016).

Technological and Temporal Barriers

Communication was further complicated by digital connectivity issues and time-zone differences. Meeting minutes showed that delays sometimes occurred due to unstable internet access in Lao PDR. However, these logistical barriers indirectly encouraged the use of asynchronous tools, such as shared folders and email summaries, that improved documentation and transparency.

As one European partner reflected:

"We started asking our counterparts to be ready for bilingual summaries and materials strong on visuals, so that they could be understood. It slowed things down but improved clarity. One important document was bilingual, and had the full support (of BRECIL) " *(European partner, Interview 10)*

The adaptation of digital communication modes echoes Mauranen's (2012) observation that online academic interaction often promotes reflective and negotiated meaning-making, particularly in multilingual teams.

Strategies for Effective Knowledge Exchange

Participants and documents identified several strategies that successfully mitigated communication barriers and fostered mutual learning.

Writing Workshops and Mentoring

Writing workshops emerged as a central mechanism for capacity building. They combined explicit instruction on academic genres with collaborative writing exercises, allowing participants to learn through doing. Reflective notes from the final workshop reveal that participants found peer feedback invaluable:

"When there was review, review document drafts, it was so much easier to learn. The European mentors were giving help in editing, correcting, they explained why it is better to write in a certain way. Why sometimes it is important to do the writing correctly, otherwise the meaning is wrong." *(Lao researcher, Workshop Reflection)*

This aligns with the scaffolding principle in sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000), where knowledge is constructed through guided practice within a supportive environment.

Translanguaging and Code-Switching

BRECIL participants often switched between English and local languages during informal discussions, particularly in regional workshops. Far from being a sign of confusion, this translanguaging practice served pragmatic and affective functions—it clarified complex ideas, reduced anxiety, and enhanced inclusivity. A Malaysian trainer explained:

"Sometimes after a heavy English discussion, important matters. we'd summarize important points in Lao among ourselves. This was helpful for many of us, then we'd share the main points in English." *(Malaysian trainer, Interview 9)*

This practice exemplifies Canagarajah's (2013) concept of translingual negotiation, where multilingual speakers strategically draw on their entire linguistic repertoires to achieve understanding. Translanguaging thus became a pedagogical and communicative resource, enriching rather than undermining collaboration.

Structured Reflection and Feedback Loops

The consortium institutionalized reflection through post-activity reports and internal evaluations. These feedback loops encouraged critical dialogue about communication practices and project progress. One project manager commented:

"We didn't stop at reporting results; we always discuss what works, what doesn't, and what are the key issues. That openness made us a learning community." *(European coordinator, Interview 11)*

This reflexive orientation transformed BRECIL from a compliance-driven initiative into a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), where continuous learning and adaptation were normalized.

Linguistic Diversity as a Resource

Initially perceived as a barrier, linguistic diversity gradually emerged as a resource for creativity, empathy, and innovation. Over time, consortium members recognized that multilingual exchanges allowed for richer interpretations of concepts and fostered a sense of shared ownership.

One Lao lecturer reflected:

"We started realizing that our way of explaining things in Lao sometimes show something different, slightly different meaning, or sometimes following our local style which has more specific meaning. Our European partners began asking us how we see certain ideas from our culture. There could be words that are understood a bit differntly" *(Lao participant, Interview 6)*

Such interactions reflect Holliday's (2018) argument that intercultural communication should be viewed as *dialogic*, where meaning is co-constructed through negotiation rather than imposed through linguistic hierarchy. By valuing different epistemological perspectives, the consortium demonstrated what Blommaert (2010) calls "linguistic equity", acknowledging multiple ways of knowing and expressing.

Moreover, linguistic plurality encouraged creative pedagogical design. During later workshops, facilitators began integrating examples in multiple languages or using comparative terminologies to clarify abstract research concepts. This multilingual pedagogy enhanced engagement and illustrated how applied linguistics principles can mediate disciplinary understanding in development-oriented projects.

In this way, linguistic diversity was reframed as a transformative asset—a driver of inclusion and innovation aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals' call for equitable access to knowledge (UNESCO, 2023). Rather than viewing English proficiency as the sole measure of capacity, BRECIL's experience suggests that linguistic adaptability and intercultural openness are equally critical dimensions of research competence in the Global South.

Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the findings affirm that research capacity building is inherently communicative. The BRECIL consortium advanced its goals not only through formal training but through everyday interactions that fostered trust, empathy, and shared learning. The findings reinforce three key insights:

1. Capacity building is dialogic. Institutional and individual growth emerged from sustained communication and mutual mentoring rather than top-down transfer.

2. Language mediates inclusion. Addressing linguistic asymmetries through translanguaging and reflective dialogue enhanced participation and equity.

3. Diversity generates innovation. Multilingualism enriched conceptual understanding and fostered creative pedagogical approaches.

These insights extend theoretical perspectives in applied linguistics by showing how social constructivism and communities of practice manifest within international development contexts. They also underscore the ethical imperative of linguistic justice in transnational higher education partnerships—ensuring that collaboration remains inclusive, reciprocal, and sustainable.

Conclusion

This study examined how the BRECIL Erasmus+ CBHE project strengthened research capacity across institutions in Lao PDR and Malaysia while navigating the complexities of multilingual and intercultural communication. Through an integrated analysis of project documents, interviews, and participant reflections, it revealed how research capacity building is not only a technical or institutional process but also a linguistic and communicative endeavour. The study demonstrates that understanding, meaning, and collaboration in transnational higher education depend fundamentally on how partners use, interpret, and negotiate language across diverse cultural and institutional contexts.

Theoretical Contributions

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the intersection of applied linguistics, social constructionism, and capacity-building research. Drawing on Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory of social constructionism, it shows how research capacity is co-constructed through discourse, negotiation, and shared linguistic practices rather than merely transferred from one institution to another. Language thus becomes the medium through which knowledge, trust, and institutional norms are collectively shaped.

In alignment with intercultural communication theory (Byram, 1997; Holliday, 2018), the findings illustrate that effective collaboration in multilingual academic settings requires more than English proficiency—it involves the capacity to interpret meanings contextually and to accommodate communicative norms. The project participants' reflections showed that communication was an iterative process of clarification, reformulation, and mutual adjustment. Such interactions reflect what Kramsch (2009) terms *symbolic competence*: the ability to make

meaning through language that transcends grammar and vocabulary to engage cultural context and social intent.

This conceptual understanding enriches the growing body of work in linguistic ethnography and internationalisation of higher education (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Jenkins, 2015), offering a nuanced model of how research collaboration unfolds in multilingual partnerships. The theoretical contribution lies in situating language as both a driver and mediator of research capacity development—highlighting communication as an ethical and epistemic dimension of global collaboration.

Empirical Contributions

Empirically, the study contributes new insights into the mechanisms and micro-processes that underpin capacity building within the Erasmus+ framework. The evidence shows that initiatives such as writing workshops, mentoring schemes, and digital training effectively enhanced both institutional structures and individual competencies in Laos and Malaysia. Yet these outcomes were sustained and amplified only when accompanied by sustained linguistic support and culturally sensitive communication strategies.

The analysis also uncovered the importance of documentation as dialogue—project reports, emails, and evaluation forms were not merely administrative artefacts but communicative acts that shaped how knowledge was shared and institutionalised. Such documentary practices revealed the subtle ways through which multilingual negotiation occurred, enabling participants to reconcile differing expectations and epistemic traditions.

The findings also affirm that linguistic diversity can function as a resource rather than a barrier. Instances of translanguaging during workshops and meetings allowed participants to explain complex ideas more clearly, engage peers with limited English proficiency, and foster mutual learning. In this sense, linguistic diversity enhanced the inclusivity and authenticity of collaboration, transforming potential communication difficulties into opportunities for reflection and growth.

Policy and Practical Implications

At the policy level, the study offers actionable recommendations for future capacity-building programmes in multilingual and multicultural settings. First, integrating linguistic and intercultural training as part of project design can strengthen not only participants' research competence but also their communicative confidence. Capacity building should therefore include structured opportunities for reflective dialogue on language use, translation practices, and communicative norms.

Second, project management frameworks within Erasmus+ and similar schemes could explicitly recognise language and communication as indicators of institutional capacity. This shift would acknowledge that successful knowledge transfer depends not merely on material resources or technology but on the ability to communicate ideas effectively across linguistic boundaries.

Third, higher education policymakers in Southeast Asia can draw on the BRECIL experience to support sustainable research ecosystems that value multilingualism as a foundation for inclusion and innovation. Encouraging publications and workshops in both global and local languages can enhance accessibility and foster equitable participation in international research.

Alignment with MAALIC 2025: Sustainability, Inclusion, and Innovation

This study resonates strongly with the MAALIC 2025 theme, demonstrating that sustainability in applied linguistics and higher education partnerships arises from inclusive and innovative communication practices.

- Sustainability was achieved through the creation of long-term mentoring relationships, digital research tools, and institutional frameworks that continued beyond the project's funding period.

- Inclusion was fostered through multilingual engagement, which allowed all partners—regardless of English proficiency—to contribute meaningfully to research discussions and decision-making.

- Innovation emerged from the creative ways participants used language—through translanguaging, contextual explanation, and re-framing—to make research training locally relevant and globally connected.

In essence, BRECIL demonstrated that when communication is treated as a shared, reflexive, and inclusive process, multilingual collaboration becomes a driver of innovation and social transformation, not a logistical obstacle.

Concluding Reflections

Ultimately, this study underscores a simple but powerful insight: research capacity is communicative capacity. Sustainable international partnerships depend on how effectively people listen, interpret, and co-construct meaning across languages and cultures. As higher education continues to internationalise, recognising the centrality of language—written, spoken, and contextual—will be crucial to fostering equitable and impactful collaboration.

BRECIL's experience reminds us that the future of applied linguistics lies not only in analysing language, but in using it ethically, inclusively, and creatively to build communities of learning that transcend geographical borders.

Implications and Future Directions

The findings of this study carry significant implications for the future design and evaluation of international capacity-building initiatives, particularly within multilingual and multicultural contexts such as Southeast Asia.

First, language and communication should be embedded as core dimensions of research capacity frameworks, rather than treated as peripheral support functions. Future Erasmus+ and ASEAN Higher Education projects could incorporate explicit "communication literacy" modules, including academic writing workshops, translanguaging strategies, and intercultural communication mentoring. This would align research development with linguistic empowerment, ensuring equitable participation across partner institutions.

Second, digital tools for multilingual collaboration deserve greater attention. AI-driven translation systems, collaborative platforms, and multimodal communication tools can reduce linguistic barriers, provided they are used ethically and reflexively. However, these tools must be complemented by human mediation—facilitated dialogue and linguistic accommodation—to preserve contextual nuance and cultural meaning.

Third, policy frameworks for international partnerships should explicitly recognise language as a component of institutional sustainability. Funding agencies could encourage projects to allocate resources for translation, editing, and language facilitation. Such recognition would

promote inclusivity and ensure that project outputs—publications, reports, or training materials—are accessible to all stakeholders, not only those fluent in English.

Fourth, future research could extend this study by comparing multilingual collaboration models across regions or disciplines. Cross-case analyses involving projects in Africa, South Asia, or Latin America could test the transferability of BRECIL's communication strategies and reveal context-specific dynamics of language use. Longitudinal studies might also explore how linguistic practices evolve after the completion of funding cycles, assessing whether inclusive communication contributes to sustained institutional growth.

Finally, applied linguistics scholars have an ongoing role in shaping the ethics and practice of transnational education. By integrating discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and critical pedagogy, future studies can continue to highlight how communication mediates power, knowledge, and inclusion in higher education.

In conclusion, fostering sustainable, inclusive, and innovative partnerships in global academia requires rethinking communication as infrastructure—a foundational element that holds together diverse epistemic communities. When language is recognised not just as a medium but as a mode of relationship and reflection, multilingual collaboration can flourish as a model for both social transformation and academic excellence.

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Metaphors in Public Health Communication: A Critical Analysis of Chinese-Language Media in Taiwan during COVID-19

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Abstract

The unfamiliarity of new realities during the COVID-19 pandemic made metaphors especially influential, as some enhanced understanding and aided emotional expression while others obscured meaning or reinforced stereotypes. However, while often studied in political and cultural contexts, COVID-19 metaphors have received little attention in mental health communication. This study addresses this gap by examining the use of metaphors in Chinese mental health publications in Taiwan between January 2020 and June 2022. Using Critical Metaphor Analysis, the research identifies and analyzes 485 metaphorical expressions across 99 news articles purposively collected from a range of health-related media and institutional platforms in Taiwan. The study reveals a shift in metaphor usage over time, from dominant war imagery to broader narratives of journey and resilience. War-related metaphors, which depicted the pandemic as an immediate threat, decreased over three years, reflecting a shift in public perception from an acute crisis to a long-term challenge. Meanwhile, journey-related metaphors emphasizing personal growth remained consistent, and metaphors portraying emotions as objects or energy sources grew, reflecting an increased focus on emotional management. This evolution in metaphor use demonstrates how public understanding and responses to the pandemic dynamically adapted. The study underscores the role of metaphors in health communication and highlights the importance of careful metaphor selection by media professionals and policymakers to manage public perception and support mental well-being during ongoing health crises.

Keywords: metaphor, mental health, COVID-19 pandemic, conceptual metaphor, critical metaphor analysis

Introduction

Metaphors serve a dual role in communication: they both shape discourse and reveal underlying perceptions. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) assert that "[…] truth is always relative to a conceptual system that is defined in large part by metaphor" (p. 159), suggesting that metaphors are fundamental in shaping our understanding of reality, which in turn affects our construction of new insights into our lives. A well-known example is the TIME IS MONEY metaphor[1], which frames time as a scarce and valuable commodity, allowing us to "spend," "save," or "waste" it. This illustrates how conceptual metaphors influence everyday decisions by mapping concrete experiences (money) onto abstract concepts (time). This interpretive power has made metaphors powerful rhetorical tools in constructing and shaping ideologies in various fields, such as politics (Charteris-Black, 2006; Efeoğlu Özcan, 2022) and science (Semino, 2011; Taylor & Dewsbury, 2018). By utilizing familiar concepts and experiences rooted in the shared

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[1] This study follows the convention in cognitive metaphor research whereby conceptual metaphors are written in small capitals (e.g., TIME IS MONEY, TIME metaphor) to indicate the underlying conceptual mapping. This notation distinguishes the conceptual metaphor itself from the linguistic expressions that realize it (e.g., "spend time," "save time," "waste time").

history and culture of a community, metaphors can be instrumental in constructing social realities and facilitating cultural transmission. In the same vein, the use of metaphors may empower individuals to actively shape others' perceptions, especially during times when unfamiliar events necessitate new understandings of reality.

An unprecedented event, the COVID-19 pandemic, was declared a global health crisis by the World Health Organization in 2020, and introduced a new reality. With over 45 million cases worldwide, the crisis led to extensive lockdowns and social distancing measures, drastically altering daily life and causing widespread emotional distress due to remote work, unemployment, and isolation. In this time of disconnection, mass media was believed to play a critical role in maintaining communication channels, providing vital information, and offering emotional support (Willingham, 2020). Thus, the use of metaphors by the media became essential, as societies were navigating this new reality.

However, the unfamiliarity of new realities makes the choice of metaphors particularly influential. Some metaphors can improve understanding and aid emotional expression, while others may obscure meaning or reinforce stereotypes. For example, in early 2020, when COVID-19 was first declared a pandemic, it was frequently described through the conceptual metaphor of WAR in media and politics. The WAR metaphor faced criticism for creating confusion and tension rather than clarity (Bates, 2020). Statements such as "we will win this war, and we'll win it much sooner than people think" (White House Coronavirus Task Force Press Briefing, 2020) oversimplified the complex issues that extended beyond politics (Niland, 2020). In response, alternative metaphors that emphasized coordination, hope, and reflection were also adopted. For instance, social distancing was likened to an ORCHESTRA: "Social distancing is like asking a string section to play pianissimo: it only works if everyone does it" (Classic FM, 2020). Similarly, metaphors of LIGHT evoked optimism and perseverance, such as "seeing the light at the end of the tunnel," while CANARY metaphors warned of societal risks, as in the sentence "COVID-19 is the yellow canary for the societal methane we've allowed to fester around us" (Xiao, 2020). Over time, metaphor usage evolved in response to the shifting stages of the pandemic: while the early and middle phases were dominated by metaphors that conveyed crisis and threat, later discourses increasingly incorporated metaphors of resilience and recovery, such as Dutch recovery plan's calls for increased "resilience [veerkracht] of the healthcare system" (Pankakoski, 2024). These emerging metaphors suggest a recognition that the pandemic would lead to fundamental changes in life, a re-evaluation of personal health, and potentially broader societal shifts towards sustainability and responsibility (Colak, 2022). In this sense, the metaphors chosen during the pandemic may not only influence public understanding and collective response but also carry implications for how individuals processed the crisis emotionally and psychologically.

Given that metaphors may influence both public perceptions of health-related issues and individual well-being (Brugman et al., 2022), the way COVID-19 was framed in mass media is significant for mental health communication. This study addresses three critical gaps in research on COVID-19 metaphor use in public media. This study addresses three critical gaps in research on COVID-19 metaphor use in public media. Firstly, although research has extensively covered the ideological use of metaphors in political discourses across specific linguistic and cultural contexts—such as Spanish (Magaña et al., 2023), Turkish (Efeoğlu Özcan, 2022), Indian (Rahman, 2020), Chinese (Zhang & Lin, 2023; Xu, 2023), and Japanese (Komatsubara, 2023)—little attention has been paid to their role in mental health communication. Following the WHO's 2020 directive, it is crucial that metaphors in public media not only reflect emotional intentions but also positively impact public well-being during the global crisis. Secondly, despite the substantial analysis of COVID-19 metaphors, there is a lack of studies exploring how these metaphors have evolved or considering alternative

framings. This study aims to fill the gaps by examining COVID-19 metaphors and those used in media aimed at promoting mental health over a three-year span. Lastly, recognizing the nuances in metaphor preferences due to cultural and linguistic differences, this research specifically targets the Taiwanese context, aiming to enrich the understanding of metaphor use during the pandemic.

To address these research gaps, this study adopts Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) as the primary analytical framework. The research questions are as follows:

How were the Chinese conceptual metaphors for COVID-19 and mental health in Taiwan expressed linguistically across different domains?

How did these Chinese metaphors evolve over time, and what do these patterns reveal about mental health interpretations during the pandemic?

How did Taiwanese mental health publications employ metaphors in specific communicative contexts, and what do these uses reveal about the rhetorical and ideological purposes of health communication during the pandemic?

Literature Review

Metaphors have long been used not only as rhetorical devices in literature but also as tools for uncovering intangible cognitive processes and analyzing social events. Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), introduced by Charteris-Black (2004), extends traditional metaphor analysis to explore the social implications of metaphorical expressions, integrating insights from corpus linguistics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, and discourse analysis. CMA has been applied across various fields, including business (Koller, 2006; Lai, 2018), environmental discourse (Mohamed, 2014; Wang & Habil, 2024), political rhetoric (Charteris-Black, 2011; Kyeremeh et al, 2023; Guo, 2025), and educational technology (Lee, 2015; Manson, 2018), highlighting its versatility in uncovering underlying intentions and ideologies.

CMA approaches metaphors from two perspectives. Firstly, the structure-focused perspective, inspired by discourse analysis, is concerned with how metaphors actively shape and structure reality. It highlights metaphor's role in emphasizing or concealing certain features, going beyond mere reflection of an objective reality. The second perspective focuses on metaphors generated by individuals, seeking to understand their intentions and the ideological implications of their language use. In this study, the structure-focused perspective is applied to trace how metaphor use in Taiwanese mental health magazines highlighted different aspects of the pandemic across three years, while the intention-focused perspective is used to interpret how these choices reflect the communicative goals of agencies promoting mental health. Both perspectives together provide insight into how discursive practices reflect socio-political power structures through metaphors (Charteris-Black, 2004).

Extending this analysis to a time context, Gibbs and Cameron (2008) explore how metaphor performance in discourse is shaped by dynamic interactions between social and cognitive processes across different time scales. At the microgenetic level, metaphor performance is influenced by moment-to-moment interactions and the immediate cognitive and social context. On a broader scale, socio-cultural dynamics play a significant role, with metaphors reflecting and shaping shared values and beliefs within specific groups. This dynamical systems approach highlights how metaphors are fluid and not static, adapting to different contexts and interactions.

Cameron et al. (2009) further propose that metaphors serve as powerful tools for revealing people's ideas, attitudes, and values through discourse analysis. The multi-layered approach

examines metaphors at four levels: the microlevel, focusing on individual metaphors in their immediate context; the mesolevel, looking at episodes of talk to show how metaphors evolve and interact; the macrolevel, considering entire discourse events to identify overarching patterns and themes; and the sociocultural level, situating metaphors within broader cultural and societal contexts. This comprehensive approach underscores the dynamic interplay between language, thought, and social context.

A more recent implementation of CMA emphasizes the importance of temporal factors in analyzing social change. Liu, Li, and Feng (2024) advanced Critical Metaphor Analysis by incorporating both cross-linguistic and time-based dimensions into a schematic four-stage framework: contextual analysis, metaphor identification, interpretation, and explanation. Their study of Chinese–English bilingual COVID-19 reports in a Chinese newspaper demonstrated how WAR metaphors were strategically retained, paraphrased, omitted, or even created anew in translation to mediate messages for different readerships. In some cases, newly created WAR metaphors in English intensified negativity toward the pandemic, revealing a time-structuring pattern aligned with China's restrictions in 2020 and political tensions with the United States. This case illustrates how CMA can capture the temporal and ideological manipulation of metaphors across languages, emphasizing the value of considering metaphor use in relation to time in sensitive discourses.

This temporal perspective shows that metaphors can have short-term effects, evident in a single sentence or conversation, and long-term implications, where their influence extends across a larger scope of discourse. Such analysis allows researchers to trace how metaphors can subtly or significantly shift perceptions within various contexts, from a brief news interview to prolonged media campaigns. This time-based perspective emphasizes the importance of considering both the immediate and extended impacts of metaphor use in understanding their role in communication and societal changes. Within the framework of CMA, which focuses on the agents who generate specific metaphors and questions the intentions or ideologies that these metaphors carry in a particular discourse, a comprehensive view of a social event can be provided.

CMA is particularly suitable for this study, as it has proven effective in analyzing COVID-19 discourse in Chinese contexts across different types of data. Xu (2023) employed CMA to compare metaphors on social media, illustrating how online discourse circulated and reshaped public perceptions of the pandemic. Zhang and Lin (2023) analyzed national newspaper articles, showing how mainstream media constructed dominant framings of COVID-19 at the societal level. Liu, Li, and Feng (2024) incorporated cross-linguistic and time-based perspectives in their analysis of Chinese–English bilingual reports, revealing how translation strategies and temporal patterns of WAR metaphors mediated political tensions and pandemic restrictions. These studies demonstrate that CMA is well suited to analyzing COVID-19, a global issue often accompanied by politicized and emotionally charged narratives. This suitability is especially relevant in Asian contexts, where the pandemic's alleged origin heightened ideological framing and stigma in public discourse. At the same time, CMA is particularly effective for examining the intentions of institutional actors, making it valuable for this research on how Taiwan's mental health agencies communicated during the crisis. Building on this foundation, the present study applies CMA to explore how metaphors shaped public understanding and emotional responses in Taiwanese mental health communication across three years of the pandemic.

Methodology

Data Collection

The data collection process involved four steps: selecting materials across a broad timeframe, curating them with the expertise of native speakers holding linguistic qualifications, conducting a thorough review, and finally compiling an electronic corpus of 99 unrepeated news articles totaling 147,762 Chinese characters. These steps ensured a comprehensive representation of text data relevant to the psychological aspects of the pandemic and provided a solid foundation for subsequent linguistic and semantic analyses in this study.

Corpus sources

A systematic and comprehensive approach was employed from January 2020 to June 2022, encompassing various online sources. This extensive timeframe ensured the inclusion of diverse news articles and reports that captured the evolving discourse surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial phase involved keyword searches on reputable online sources, including Common Health Magazine, the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW), the Health News, the Chinese Mental Health Association, the Taiwan Depression Prevention Association, and Health & Hope (HEHO). The selection of these sources was guided by their explicit focus on mental health issues and their consistent coverage of the psychological dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, each source provides content directly addressing public concerns about stress, anxiety, depression, and coping strategies during the crisis, thereby ensuring the corpus reflects the mental health discourse most relevant to this study. Additionally, their accessibility to the public promotes transparency and adherence to academic research standards. Government-affiliated sources like MOHW offer authoritative information on public health, while nonprofit organizations such as the Chinese Mental Health Association and the Taiwan Depression Prevention Association bolster the credibility of the data. Inclusion of popular sources like Common Health Magazine and HEHO aligns with the research focus on metaphor's impact on mental imagery during the pandemic, given their broad readership and potential influence on public perceptions. The diverse perspectives from various media platforms enrich the corpus, while continuous news updates provide valuable insights into the evolving discourse on pandemic psychology.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection process began with keyword searches in the online news agencies. Two individuals, both native Chinese speakers with master's degrees in applied linguistics, meticulously sifted through articles to ensure relevance and linguistic nuances necessary for analysis. The third person, the primary researcher, double-checked article suitability and relevance to eliminate potential bias, ensuring a comprehensive representation of textual material addressing the psychological dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data collection process followed three distinct steps:

Step 1: the researchers performed key-word searches using the word 疫('epidemic') on the designated websites, locating key phrases such as 疫情('epidemic'), 防疫 ('epidemic prevention'), 疫病 ('epidemic disease'), and the like, were included. The choice of the general term 疫 ('epidemic') over 新冠肺炎 ('coronavirus disease') was based on the observation that the magazine seldom used the full name of the pandemic directly.

Step 2: a full-text screening of selected articles was conducted. Articles discussing emotional states and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic were collected. Those categorized under various topics and divisions underwent an initial screening process based on news titles and content to determine their relevance.

Step 3: the selected articles were collected and saved as text files to facilitate later identification and interpretation.

The data collection process began on February 3rd, 2020, with the earliest pertinent news article, marking the pandemic's initial stages. It concluded on June 7, 2022, covering the most recent developments. In total, 99 unrepeated news articles, constituting 147,762 Chinese characters, were meticulously collected, each presented and stored in electronic format for further analysis. This rigorous and continuously updated methodology aimed to construct a corpus encompassing a diverse range of texts addressing the psychological facets of the pandemic.

Data Analysis

This study draws on three complementary approaches to establish the analytical framework. (1) Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) provides the overarching discourse-analytic lens that links speakers' metaphor choices to communicative purpose, ideology, and audience through a cycle of identification, interpretation, and explanation (Charteris-Black, 2004). (2) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) treats metaphor as systematic mappings from concrete source domains to abstract target domains (e.g., LIFE IS A JOURNEY), which we use to label and compare patterns across texts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993). (3) The Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) operationalizes the identification stage by comparing a lexical unit's contextual meaning with its more basic, conventional meaning; a salient contrast indicates metaphorical use (Pragglejaz Group, 2007).

In this study, CMA frames the main inquiry, CMT informs categorization and interpretation, and MIP ensures reliable identification of metaphorical expressions. To implement the analytical framework and ensure reliability, a seven-step coding procedure was developed and followed.

Theoretical Framework and Analytical Stages

Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) was adopted as the main framework for analysis. CMA follows a tripartite model: identification, interpretation, and explanation of metaphor in a specific context. Each stage has a distinct purpose: identification detects metaphorical expressions by contrasting contextual with basic, conventional meanings; interpretation formulates conceptual mappings and categorizes them; and explanation links metaphor choice to social agency, audience, and persuasive function in context.

In the identification stage, linguistic data were examined to detect metaphorical expressions using the procedures of MIP. The process includes three steps: (1) each text was comprehensively read to gain a general understanding of its intended meaning; (2) lexical units were identified and their contextual meanings compared with their more fundamental, conventional meanings; and (3) units were marked as metaphorical if they displayed a noticeable contrast between their contextual meaning and their basic, fundamental meaning.

Noted that lexical units were treated at the word level, with conventionalized multiword expressions like idioms also considered as single units. Judgments of "basic, fundamental meaning" prioritized conventionality and were verified against dictionary definitions in established lexicographic sources (Pragglejaz Group, 2007). Additionally, for the purposes of this study, only those relevant to mental calmness, peacefulness, and the promotion of mental health were annotated, while figurative language unrelated to these themes was not coded for analysis.

The interpretation stage focuses on establishing conceptual metaphors. CMT provided the theoretical basis for linking concrete, experiential source domains to abstract target domains. The analysis classified patterns into ontological (e.g., EMOTION IS OBJECT), structural (e.g., LIFE IS A JOURNEY), and orientational types (e.g., MORE IS UP). Because the corpus targets a general readership in contemporary Chinese magazine and news discourse, units of analysis extended beyond isolated words to include entire communicative units within sentences (including conventionalized multiword expressions). This approach captures colloquial metaphor use and reflects how readers encounter authentic metaphors in context.

In the explanation stage, the social context underlying metaphor choice was examined. CMA explores how social agents select specific metaphors based on their rhetorical and ideological motivations, aiming to understand their persuasive societal functions (Charteris-Black, 2004). Imani (2022) expanded CMA to include three critical dimensions influencing metaphor use: audience, context, and topic. These factors, along with the speaker or author's ideological stance and power dynamics, shape how metaphors are tailored to resonate with particular audiences and contexts, effectively evoking targeted mental imagery. However, in the present study, the agent had been defined as news media engaged in public health communication, and metaphor choices were interpreted within this communicative frame rather than as evidence of hidden agendas. Accordingly, attention was directed to the ways in which metaphorical framing encouraged calmness, peacefulness, and the promotion of mental well-being.

Data Coding Procedure

To implement the analytical framework, a coding team was established and guided by a seven-step protocol. The team consisted of two trained reviewers, while the researcher served as an independent third party to ensure objectivity and balance in decision-making. Both reviewers were female graduate students in applied linguistics, around twenty-five years old, and native speakers of Mandarin Chinese born and residing in Taiwan. With familiarity in Taiwanese varieties of Chinese, they had also completed coursework in cognitive linguistics and were knowledgeable about metaphor theories. Noted that these reviewers were not involved in the data collection procedure, ensuring independence between data gathering and analysis.

The coding protocol emphasized independent double coding, consensus adjudication, and external validation. This protocol complemented the three stages of CMA by enhancing procedural transparency while strengthening reliability. The procedure is as follows:

Step 1: The researcher established a review group consisting of two native Chinese-speaking reviewers with backgrounds in linguistics.

Step 2: The researcher trained the two reviewers in metaphor identification using MIP until they reached a consensus on identifying metaphorical expressions in Chinese.

Step 3: The two reviewers individually and independently examined and identified metaphorical expressions within the collected data.

Step 4: The reviewers organized the results, concentrating on metaphor use clusters, and generated conceptual metaphors.

Step 5: The reviewers collectively confirmed their metaphor identification and interpretation. Any disagreements were resolved through discussions between the two reviewers; when consensus proved elusive, the researcher made the final decision.

Step 6: The researcher and the reviewers collaboratively conducted the explanation stage of CMA by situating metaphors in their communicative contexts, confirming the agents involved, and discussing the rhetorical and ideological purposes of metaphor use.

Step 7: The researcher and reviewers jointly applied purposive sampling to select four passages for qualitative illustration. The selection ensured (1) coverage of major metaphor families, (2) variation across different media agents, and (3) representation of different stages of the pandemic (2020–2022). Chinese originals were retained, and English translations were drafted by the researcher and cross-checked by the reviewers.

Throughout the process, the reviewers worked independently during the identification stage (Step 3) and collaboratively during the interpretation stages (Steps 4 and 5). The researcher was involved only at the initial stage, when forming and training the team (Steps 1 and 2), and later when adjudicating unresolved disagreements (Step 5). For the explanation stage (Step 6 and 7), the researcher and reviewers worked together to interpret the broader communicative functions and critical implications of metaphor use.

Results

In total, 485 occurrences of metaphorical expressions were identified across the 99 articles, encompassing words, phrases, and sentences. Among these, 319 entries directly relate to COVID-19 or the pandemic, characterized by the formula "COVID-19 IS...". The remaining 166 entries pertain to conceptual metaphors concerning emotions and mental health. Certain common conceptual metaphors occurred only once in the corpus, yet they are retained in the list to faithfully represent the results.

This section presents the findings in relation to the research questions. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 report on the linguistic expressions of conceptual metaphors and their evolving patterns over time. Section 4.3 then extends the analysis by interpreting how these metaphors were strategically employed in context, linking the results to broader communicative and mental health implications.

Linguistic Expression of Metaphors

In line with Research Question 1, this section examines how conceptual metaphors were expressed linguistically in the collected texts. The results are divided into two parts: metaphors directly framing COVID-19 and metaphors promoting mental health. These findings reveal the range of metaphorical framings used by Taiwanese media during the pandemic.

Conceptual Metaphor of COVID-19

Table 1 reports the results of the "COVID-19 IS..." conceptual metaphor. The analysis identified 319 instances of conceptual metaphors. It is important to note that these occurrences refer to metaphorical expressions found within communicative units, such as sentence clusters, rather than individual words or characters. Therefore, the number of occurrences here does not represent the number of Chinese characters but the number of metaphorical expressions.

The conceptual metaphors found can be categorized into three types of metaphors: structural, orientational, and ontological metaphors. Within the structural metaphor category, the most prevalent theme is BATTLING/MILITARY/WAR/ATTACK (96 occurrences), followed by JOURNEY (39), STRUGGLE (19), and LIGHT/DARKNESS (13) and BALANCED (13). In the orientational metaphor category, QUANTITY emerges as the predominant theme with 30 occurrences, while WEIGHT and TEMPERATURE have 8 and 6 occurrences, respectively. In the ontological metaphor category, "NATURE" stands out with 33 occurrences, followed by "CONTAINER" with 32, "IMAGES" with 12, and "VIRUS" with 8 occurrences.

Taken together, the data suggest that war imagery dominated discourse but coexisted with alternative framings. The presence of JOURNEY and BALANCE metaphors indicates attempts to normalize or humanize the pandemic experience beyond warfare. Orientational and ontological metaphors further diversified the discourse by offering measurable or embodied ways of conceptualizing COVID-19. This mixture of metaphors demonstrates how the Taiwanese mental health media simultaneously emphasized urgency, endurance, and contextualization, supporting the argument that metaphor choice adapted to both the immediate crisis and the longer-term psychological impact of the pandemic.

Table 1. *Number of Occurrences of Conceptual Metaphor "COVID-19 IS ..."*

Structural metaphor (190)	Orientational metaphor (44)	Ontological metaphor (85)
1. BATTLING/MILITARY/ WAR/ATTACK (96)	8. QUANTITY (30)	11. NATURE (33)
2. JOURNEY (39)	9. WEIGHT (8)	12. CONTAINER (32)
3. STRUGGLE (19)	10. TEMPERATURE (6)	13. IMAGES (12)
4. LIGHT/DARKNESS (13)		14. VIRUS (8)
5. BALANCED (13)		
6. VIOLENCE (9)		
7. FIRE (1)		

Conceptual Metaphors of Mental Health Promotion

Various conceptual metaphors have been identified in the articles aimed at promoting mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. While these metaphors are not directly related to COVID-19 itself, they offer valuable insights into how individuals perceive and articulate mental health challenges in this context. Table 2 presents the distribution of these metaphors across domains such as emotion, life, time, and other thematic categories.

The most dominant metaphors appear in the EMOTION domain (66 occurrences), with EMOTION IS OBJECT (49) as the most frequent, reflecting a tendency to treat emotions as tangible burdens that can be carried or managed. Less frequent metaphors such as EMOTION IS ENERGY (10) and EMOTION IS LIVING CREATURE (7) highlight emotions as dynamic forces or animate agents, stressing their vitality and unpredictability.

The LIFE domain (14) frames life as both an investment and a substance, underscoring concerns about resource management and the material value of well-being. The TIME domain (20), especially TIME AS A MOVING OBJECT (18), conveys the sense of time passing under uncertainty, while the rare TIME IS MONEY (2) indicates limited economic framing in this context. Additional metaphors include metonymic expressions (43), which link mental health to embodied behaviors, and other categories such as INFORMATION IS SUBSTANCE (14) and CONSEQUENCE IS PRICE (8), emphasizing information overload and the psychological costs of the pandemic.

Overall, the predominance of emotion-based metaphors highlights the centrality of coping and stress management, supported by life, time, and embodied framings. These results indicate a tendency for Taiwanese media to emphasize emotional resilience alongside broader perspectives on mental health during the pandemic.

Table 2. *Number of Occurrences of Other Conceptual Metaphors*

EMOTION (66)	
1. EMOTION IS OBJECT (49)	
2. EMOTION IS ENERGY (10)	
3. EMOTION IS LIVING CREATURE (7)	
LIFE (14)	
4. LIFE IS INVESTMENT (7)	
5. LIFE IS SUBSTANCE (7)	
TIME (20)	
6. TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT (18)	
7. TIME IS MONEY (2)	
Metonymic expressions (43)	
8. Metonymy (27)	
9. Symbolic behaviors (16)	
Others (23)	
10. INFORMATION IS SUBSTANCE (14)	
11. CONSEQUENCE IS PRICE (8)	
12. INCIDENT IS A PLAY (1)	

Evolving Patterns and Interpretation

In line with Research Question 2, this section examines how metaphor use changed over the course of the pandemic. Drawing on Table 3, the analysis tracks both COVID-19–related metaphors and mental health metaphors from 2020 to 2022. Subsections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 highlight, respectively, the shifting patterns in crisis framing and the evolving conceptualizations of emotions, life, and time, showing how these trends collectively reflect changing interpretations of mental health during the pandemic.

Table 3. *Number of Occurrences of Conceptual Metaphors by Years*

Conceptual Metaphor (Occurrences)	Year 2020		Year 2021		Year 2022	
Conceptual Metaphor about COVID-19						
1. BATTLING/MILITARY/ WAR/ATTACK (96)	38	(38%)	37	(24%)	21	(36%)
2. JOURNEY (39)	13	(12%)	19	(12%)	7	(12%)
3. STRUGGLE (19)	7	(7%)	11	(7%)	1	(2%)
4. LIGHT/DARKNESS (13)	2	(2%)	10	(6%)	1	(2%)
5. BALANCED (13)	2	(2%)	4	(3%)	7	(12%)
6. VIOLENCE (9)	1	(1%)	5	(3%)	3	(5%)
7. FIRE (1)	1	(1%)	0	(0%)	0	(0%)
8. QUANTITY (30)	9	(8%)	17	(11%)	4	(7%)
9. WEIGHT (8)	4	(4%)	4	(3%)	0	(0%)
10. TEMPERATURE (6)	**4**	(4%)	2	(1%)	0	(0%)
11. NATURE (33)	16	(15%)	14	(9%)	3	(5%)
12. CONTAINER (32)	6	(6%)	19	(12%)	7	(12%)

13.	IMAGES (12)	3	(3%)	5	(3%)	4	(7%)
14.	VIRUS (8)	0	(0%)	7	(5%)	1	(2%)
	Total number of occurrences	**106**	**(100%)**	**154**	**(100%)**	**59**	**(100%)**
	Conceptual Metaphors about Other Subjects						
1.	EMOTION IS OBJECT (49)	18	(24%)	28	(41%)	3	(13%)
2.	EMOTION IS ENERGY (10)	5	(7%)	3	(4%)	2	(9%)
3.	EMOTION IS LIVING CREATURE (7)	1	(1%)	3	(4%)	3	(13%)
4.	LIFE IS INVESTMENT (7)	4	(5%)	1	(1%)	2	(9%)
5.	LIFE IS SUBSTANCE (7)	2	(3%)	2	(3%)	3	(13%)
6.	TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT (18)	12	(16%)	6	(9%)	0	(0%)
7.	TIME IS MONEY (2)	1	(1%)	0	(0%)	1	(4%)
8.	Metonymy (27)	13	(17%)	11	(16%)	3	(13%)
9.	Symbolic behaviors (16)	7	(9%)	9	(13%)	0	(0%)
10.	INFORMATION IS SUBSTANCE (14)	10	(13%)	0	(0%)	4	(17%)
11.	CONSEQUENCE IS PRICE (8)	2	(3%)	4	(6%)	2	(9%)
12.	INCIDENT IS A PLAY (1)	0	(0%)	1	(1%)	0	(0%)
	Total number of occurrences	**75**	**(100%)**	**68**	**(100%)**	**23**	**(100%)**
	Total number of occurrences by years	**181**		**222**		**82**	

Shifts in COVID-19 Metaphor Usage

Over the course of three years (2020-2023), the evolving usage of metaphorical language to describe the COVID-19 pandemic reflects changing public perceptions and understanding of the pandemic's nature and impact. In 2020, the dominant BATTLING/MILITARY/WAR/ATTACK metaphor accounted for 38% of occurrences, indicating the initial pandemic impact as a war-like situation. However, the significantly decline to 24% in 2021 signifies a shift from viewing it as an immediate threat to a nuanced understanding. In 2022, though the percentage raised back to 36% but the occurrences was only 21, showing the reducing needs for metaphor uses. In contrast, the JOURNEY metaphor demonstrated consistency, accounting for 12% of metaphors in 2020, maintained in 2021 and in 2022, reflecting the enduring public perception.

The STRUGGLE metaphor exhibited fluctuations, from 7% in 2020 to 7% (11) in 2021, then decreasing to 2% in 2022. The VIOLENCE metaphor transitioned from 1% in 2020 to 3% in 2021, with a slight decline to 5% in 2022. The BALANCED metaphor started at 2% in 2020, rising to 3% in 2021 and 12% in 2022. These shifts in frequency of metaphorical language usage mirror the evolving societal perceptions of the pandemic, suggesting a growing emphasis on equilibrium in the context of COVID-19.

In the same vein, the evolving use of metaphors for COVID-19 also corresponds with the changing perception of the pandemic from an immediate threat to a more complex challenge. The FIRE metaphor, emerging in 2020, faded in subsequent years, signifying limited applicability. Similarly, the WEIGHT metaphor began at 3% in 2020, dropped to 2% in 2021, and vanished in 2022, indicating diminishing relevance. The NATURE metaphor declined from 16% in 2020 to 9% in 2021, reaching 5% in 2022, reflecting changing attitudes. Conversely, the VIRUS metaphor, starting at 0% in 2020, rose to 5% in 2021 but decreased to 2% in 2022. These shifts align with evolving societal perceptions of COVID-19, highlighting the transition from an immediate threat to a multifaceted, nuanced challenge.

Together, these shifts highlight a transition from urgent crisis imagery at the pandemic's onset to more diverse and nuanced framings in later years. The persistence of WAR metaphors alongside the growth of BALANCE metaphors illustrates how Taiwanese media adapted its discourse from confrontation to resilience.

Shifts in Mental Health–Related Metaphors

Conceptual metaphors about other subjects reflect the evolving focus on mental health. In 2020, EMOTION AS OBJECT was predominant, constituting 24% of occurrences. EMOTION AS ENERGY and EMOTION AS LIVING CREATURE followed at 7% and 1%, respectively. By 2021, the emphasis on EMOTION AS OBJECT rose sharply to 41%, while the percentages for EMOTION AS ENERGY and EMOTION AS LIVING CREATURE remained stable at 4%, indicating a sustained perception of emotions as both tangible and dynamic. However, by 2022, there was a notable shift: EMOTION AS OBJECT dropped to 13%, while EMOTION AS ENERGY and EMOTION AS LIVING CREATURE increased to 9% and 13%, respectively, highlighting a broader recognition of emotions as integral to the human experience, rather than a solid object.

In addition, the shifts in metaphorical use over the years reflect changing attitudes toward life and time, offering insights into the evolving mental landscape of individuals navigating the challenges of COVID-19. In terms of metaphors related to LIFE, the LIFE IS INVESTMENT metaphor decreased from 5% in 2020 to 1% in 2021, then surged to 9% in 2022, suggesting a growing emphasis on the strategic value of life. Meanwhile, LIFE IS SUBSTANCE saw less fluctuation, maintaining at 3% in 2020 and 2021, before jumping to 13% in 2022, indicating a stronger perception of life as a tangible and significant entity. In contrast, the TIME IS A MOVING OBJECT metaphor began at 16% in 2020, dropped to 9% in 2021, and was absent by 2022, reflecting a shift away from viewing time as continuously passing. These trends highlight a deepening materialization and appreciation of both life and time, albeit more significantly for life, as the pandemic progressed.

While other conceptual metaphors did not show significant shifts, they generally indicated a recovery from pandemic stress. INFORMATION AS SUBSTANCE was prominent at 13% in 2020, disappeared in 2021, and surged to 17% in 2022. This fluctuation reflects initial ignorance followed by a growing thirst for information as the situation progressed. The CONSEQUENCE IS PRICE metaphor, which evaluates consequences in terms of cost, rose from 3% in 2020 to 9% in 2022, suggesting a shift in focus from managing the crisis to addressing its aftermath. These trends highlight the dynamic use of metaphorical language and the evolving perceptions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Metaphor Explanation in Context

This section addresses Research Question 3, which investigates how Taiwanese mental health publications employed metaphors in specific communicative contexts and what these uses

reveal about the rhetorical and ideological purposes of health communication during the pandemic. To illustrate these dynamics, four representative excerpts were selected from different years and media agents. These examples highlight how metaphors functioned not only as linguistic expressions but also as strategic tools for guiding perception, framing resilience, and shaping public response.

COVID-19 Metaphors in Media Narratives

Excerpt (1) features the repeated use of the conceptual metaphor "COVID-19 IS BATTLING/ MILITARY/WAR/ATTACK" within the context of promoting mental health and reporting on common health during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. This metaphor initially establishes the pandemic as an invisible adversary, invoking associations of fear and vulnerability.

事實上，面對「看不見的敵人」，這甚至不是賴碧蓮第一次主動選擇長驅直入，站上疫情的最前線。…賴碧蓮的回答既不是武漢包機，也不是抗煞之役，而是從護專畢業後，自己第一時間選擇了投入加護病房。…「作為將士，就是要戰死沙場，直到今天，我還是這麼想。」(Article 11, Common Health, 2020/6/24)

Translation: In fact, facing the "invisible enemy", this is not even the first time that Lai Bilian has taken the initiative to march forward and stand on the front line of the epidemic…. Lai Bilian's answer was neither a chartered flight from Wuhan nor a fight against evil, but that after graduating from nursing school, she immediately chose to invest in the intensive care unit. As a soldier, you must die on the battlefield. To this day, I still think so.

Considering the agent, Common Health Magazine, whose mission is dedicated to promoting healthy and joyful living, their approach to COVID-19 takes a unique perspective. The article depicts the virus as a challenge that requires confrontation, celebrating the bravery and proactive stance of medical professionals. Unlike typical representations that suggest vulnerability, this article portrays them as determined "soldiers" on the frontline, committed to their duty. This approach not only honors their dedication but also encourages readers to recognize their potential for making a positive impact during tough times.

This example demonstrates the adaptability of metaphors, showing how the "COVID-19 IS WAR" metaphor can vary in meaning depending on the context. While it's often critiqued for promoting obedience, here it highlights the resolve and agency of healthcare workers, effectively reshaping their role from passive participants to active, empowered contributors in public health.

In excerpt (2), from an article by the Taiwan Depression Prevention Association dated April 1, 2021, the journey metaphor is harnessed to convey a message about mental health. This metaphor underscores that mental health is an ongoing process like a lifelong expedition. It also aligns with the concept of personal growth and development, emphasizing that individuals can learn and evolve during challenging times, underlining the agency of individuals in actively shaping their mental well-being amidst a crisis.

幾天後便被醫院要求居家隔離，開始了我在隔離期間忐忑的心路歷程。…避免自己掉入負面想法不斷輪迴的死胡同中。…你我都可能處在危機之下：一起攜手走過危機。
(Article 40, Taiwan Depression Prevention Association, 2021/4/1)
Translation: A few days later, I was asked by the hospital to isolate myself at home, which started my anxious journey during the isolation period. …prevent yourself from falling into a dead-end cycle of negative thoughts. …You and I may be in crisis. Let's go through it together.

The agent, Taiwan Depression Prevention Association, uses the journey metaphor to frame the pandemic as a navigable part of life. Mandatory home isolation introduces this metaphor, portraying it as a passage through uncertainty and anxiety. This approach conveys that the pandemic, while challenging, is not insurmountable. It suggests that with determination and support, individuals can move through this difficult period just like any other phase of life.

Mental Health Metaphors in Media Narratives

In excerpt (3) from an article published by Common Health Magazine on May 1, 2020, the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic were marked by public anxiety and uncertainty. The agent recognized the heightened stress levels during this time and chose to address the issue by framing stress as a measurable weight. This metaphor implies that mental well-being can be quantified and objectively measured. The article encourages individuals to seek professional help, specifically from doctors or psychologists, when their stress becomes overwhelming. This approach highlights the importance of objective measurement in assessing mental health and aligns with Common Health's mission to provide support during times of uncertainty.

最後，如果你的身心壓力已經負荷不了，別猶豫，請記得找醫師（心理師）諮詢，他們將能給你最專業、可靠的建議。(Article 3, Common Health, 2020/5/1)
Translation: Finally, if your physical and mental pressure can no longer bear it, don't hesitate to consult a doctor (psychologist). They will be able to give you the most professional and reliable advice.

In excerpt (4), published by Health News on April 26, 2022, the use of the conceptual metaphor QUANTITY within the context of "Medicine for the Pandemic" presents a remarkable sense of relief. The agent, Health News, effectively conveys a message of optimism and progress in addressing the pandemic's challenges. Highlighting medical advancements, the article instills confidence in the effectiveness of new treatments. Published in 2022, after more than two years of global struggle with the pandemic, the timing emphasizes a turning point. The mention of an effective treatment provides hope, suggesting significant progress in the ongoing fight against the virus.

清冠一號對於中重症有明顯減輕感染症狀的效果，搭配西藥有一加一大於二的功效。
(Article 82, Health News, 2022/4/26)
Translation: Qingguan No. 1 has the effect of significantly reducing the symptoms of moderate to severe infections. When combined with western medicine, the effect of one plus one is greater than two.

The analysis underscores the strategic use of metaphors by various agents to address the pandemic at different stages. Common Health Magazine initially framed COVID-19 as a battle, invoking courage and empowerment. As the pandemic progressed, it shifted to a weight metaphor, helping quantify and manage public anxiety by promoting measurable mental well-being. The Taiwan Depression Prevention Association, through the journey metaphor, emphasized resilience and personal growth in mental health. Meanwhile, Health News

highlighted a turning point in the pandemic by focusing on the efficacy of medical advancements, instilling hope and optimism. These examples show how agents effectively adapt metaphors to convey messages that resonate with the changing dynamics of a global crisis.

Discussion

Metaphor Adaptation

The findings indicate a variety of Chinese metaphors used to describe the pandemic. These metaphors represent the experience of managing COVID-19 through images of a battle (WAR), a journey (JOURNEY), or a manageable entity (STRUGGLE and BALANCED). All chosen source domains share characteristics, treating the disease as a target to be combated over time while striving to maintain a balance in life.

This finding is unsurprising, as many studies on disease have highlighted the features. Sontag (1989) analyzed AIDS discourse, noting that illness is often described in military terms, portraying suffering as warfare and framing death as a medical failure rather than an inevitable tragedy. Similarly, Nerlich (2004) examined the political discourse around foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) in the UK and found that WAR metaphors were used by the media and policymakers to promote a proactive stance against FMD. More recently, Deng et al. (2021) and Efeoğlu Özcan (2022) focused on COVID-19 and confirmed the frequent use of WAR metaphors during the pandemic. Across different languages, as mentioned previously, studies have observed the same prevalence of WAR metaphors. All these studies highlight similar entailments of WAR metaphors: enemy, battle, struggle, winning, and losing. Disease is perceived as a difficulty that needs to be combated, managed, and ultimately overcome.

Extant literature also demonstrates the prevalence of war-related metaphors in expressing ideologies of management and control. For example, Demjén et al. (2016) investigated perceptions of death and found that VIOLENCE metaphors, such as battle and fighting, are frequently used to express defiance against an uncontrollable death, such as dying from a disease. Similarly, Gao and Wu (2024) analyzed blogs written by parents of children with cancer and identified the dominant use of WAR metaphors. These metaphors often serve as a means for parents to express their emotions and motivate their children to actively fight against the cancer. In both cases, the chosen metaphors highlight attempts to resist natural forces and exert control over life circumstances.

However, this study implies subtle differences from previous research. In excerpts (1) to (3), the metaphors display a more positive intention, rather than evoking aggressive instability. Instead of emphasizing losses, excerpt (1) celebrates the dedication and courage of those combating the disease. Excerpt (2) focuses on progress rather than isolation in the journey, and excerpt (3) suggests control over what are perceived as uncontrollable emotions. Instead of foregrounding the entailments such as battle, loss, and being out of control, more positive features are highlighted in the metaphors: courage, progress, and seeking help. Such adaptation of traditional metaphors not only reflects the speakers' specific intentions but also underscores a shift in metaphorical framing that is sensitive to the context and audience needs.

The adaptive nature of metaphor is further evidenced from audience perspectives by Brugman et al.'s (2022) study, which examined how COVID-19 metaphor perceptions vary by source domain and national context among 216 participants from various countries. Their findings reveal that familiarity and aptness with the target domain differ by country and experience, shaping metaphor perceptions and appreciation. This underscores the necessity for careful metaphor selection by governments and media to effectively communicate during the

pandemic, to avoid resistance that could impede communicative goals. Semino's (2011) study similarly advocates the adaptive use of metaphor across disciplines, illustrating how metaphors are customized for different audiences and highlighting their dynamic and evolutionary nature across discourses. Likewise, Imani (2022) identifies three key factors—audience, context, and topic—that, along with the ideological stance and power dynamics of the speaker, influence the construction of metaphors to resonate with specific audiences and contexts. These insights are pertinent to the present study, which is set in the context of promoting mental health. It demonstrates that positive framing in COVID-19 metaphors can effectively engage audiences seeking information on mental stability and calls for more adaptive use among socially influential groups.

Metaphor Dynamics

This study examines the evolving patterns of metaphor usage over a three-year span, revealing insights into contemporary interpretations of both the pandemic and mental health. Initially in 2020, the prevalent WAR metaphor portrayed the crisis as an urgent, war-like situation, instilling fear. As time progressed, the decline in this metaphor's usage suggests a shift in societal perceptions—from viewing the pandemic as an immediate threat to recognizing it as a more complex, enduring challenge. This transition indicates a deeper understanding of the multifaceted issues posed by COVID-19 and a move toward a more nuanced approach. Simultaneously, the consistent use of the JOURNEY metaphor throughout the pandemic illustrates mental health as a continuous expedition. It underscores how individuals navigate challenges and actively shape their well-being, emphasizing resilience and personal growth while acknowledging the dynamic nature of mental health amid changing pandemic circumstances.

The evolving trend can be seen at different stages of COVID-19. Magaña et al. (2023) analyzed TV news from March to June 2020, identifying a dominant use of WAR metaphors, followed by JOURNEY and NATURAL DISASTER metaphors, reflecting an initial defensive stance against the pandemic. The WAR metaphors highlighted the urgent need for medical resources like protective gear and ventilators. Similarly, Zhang and Lin (2023) investigated news articles from January to February 2020 —when the pandemic had already escalated significantly in China—and found the TREATING DISEASE IS WAR metaphor prevailed in China. This framing not only involved key social agents like political party members, but also featured them as part of a heroic struggle in these "Heroic Fight" scenarios.

The change of metaphor uses can be observed in Komatsubara's (2023) study, which examines COVID-19 metaphors in Japanese newspapers over time, noting that shifts in usage corresponded with new waves of infections. He suggests that temporal analysis of metaphorical framing enhances understanding of evolving event. In a related study, Xu (2022) reviewed Twitter and Weibo data over a week in February 2022 and found that while war metaphors remained prominent, the zombie metaphor was prevalent in English texts and the classroom metaphor dominated in Chinese texts. This underscores the active participation of individuals in selecting metaphors that resonate with their personal experiences, rather than merely adopting those shaped by social, historical, and cultural factors. Such dynamics stem from the perspective of time and the evolving experiences of people over time.

Excerpt (5) gives an example. During the Omicron resurgence in May 2022, marked by increased anxiety, Common Health used a tsunami metaphor to depict the swift comeback and eventual receding tide, rather than a prolonged war. This example shows the dynamic nature of metaphors in adapting to evolving situations, demonstrating how time, context, and the agent's strategy influence metaphor interpretation.

Omicron 海嘯般襲來，北市篩檢站陽性率已達 65%，影響所及，以篩代隔呼聲大起。
(Article 87, Common Health, 2022/5/2)
Translation: Omicron has hit like a tsunami, and the positivity rate at the screening station in Taipei has reached 65%. The impact has led to louder calls for screening to replace isolation.

In summary, evolving metaphor usage in Taiwan during the COVID-19 crisis provides deep insights into interpretations of mental health. These shifts from initial crisis responses to more adaptable strategies reflect society's dynamic adaptation. As Semino (2021) claims, metaphors offer only a partial view of phenomena, necessitating varied metaphors for different stages and audiences. The metaphors in this discourse influence public understanding and response to the pandemic's mental health challenges, shaping contemporary mental health interpretations during this unprecedented crisis.

Conclusion

The study examines the use of metaphors in Chinese during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on their role in promoting mental health in Taiwan. The study explores how metaphors conceptualize conditions and create new realities, revealing the cognitive associations, social representations, and symbolic meanings in human perception. It examines the influence of society, culture, and environment on metaphor selection in specific discourse contexts. Spanning from January 2020 to June 2022, the study collects data from varied online sources for their relevance and credibility in mental health. The analysis utilizes Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Metaphor Identification Procedure, and Critical Metaphor Analysis to identify, interpret, explain, and analyze the metaphors, focusing on how metaphors are integrated to align with the news agency's communicative goals.

The findings show that metaphors such as BATTLE and JOURNEY conceptualized mental health as either a conflict or a path to personal growth, while structural metaphors (e.g., QUANTITY, WEIGHT) and orientational metaphors (e.g., NATURE, CONTAINER) emphasized management and perception of well-being. Metaphors portraying emotions as objects, energy, or living creatures highlighted themes of control, dynamism, and empathy. Additionally, metaphors such as LIFE IS INVESTMENT and TIME IS MONEY reflected the perceived value of life and time during the pandemic. The evolving usage of these metaphors, from dominant battle imagery to broader narratives of journey and resilience, illustrates a shift in public sentiment from viewing the crisis as an immediate threat to recognizing it as a longer-term challenge.

This adaptability of metaphorical language plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding and responses to the mental health challenges posed by the pandemic. In general, the study shows the multifaceted role of metaphors in health communication, emphasizing their significant impact on public perception and behavior during health crises. Such communicative power of metaphors may extend into various domain beyond health, like political, medical, psychological, therapeutic, scientific, and educational domains. Thus, purposeful metaphor selection by health communicators, policymakers, and media professionals can strengthen mental health messaging, while inappropriate framings risk reinforcing fear or stigma.

By situating metaphor analysis within the domain of mental health communication, this study also contributes to applied linguistics in several ways. First, it extends critical metaphor analysis to the intersection of public health and media discourse, demonstrating how linguistic choices can influence resilience, coping strategies, and collective attitudes in times of crisis. Second, it highlights the role of metaphors in multilingual and multicultural contexts, showing how culturally grounded expressions in Chinese resonate with Taiwanese audiences while

offering insights for future comparative studies. Third, the study advances applied linguistic research on discourse strategies by illustrating how metaphors adapt dynamically over time, thus providing a methodological model for tracing linguistic change in response to global events. This study highlights the importance of metaphor research in applied linguistics as a tool for understanding how language mediates meaning, supports public well-being, and informs communication strategies in crisis contexts.

While the study provides insights into the adaptive and dynamic nature of metaphors, it also has limitations. The analysis is confined to January 2020–June 2022, excluding later developments of the pandemic. Future research could extend the timeframe to capture subsequent phases. The study also relies on news articles, representing a relatively narrow genre of communication. Broader sources such as social media, public speeches, and personal narratives would enrich our understanding of metaphor use. In addition, while this study focused on qualitative methods of identification and interpretation, future studies might incorporate quantitative approaches to assess metaphor prevalence and distribution more comprehensively. Finally, although the study examined how metaphors shape perceptions of mental health, it did not investigate their actual psychological outcomes. Future research could empirically evaluate how metaphorical framings affect readers' emotional and cognitive responses.

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Exploring language teachers' emotions in the Production-Oriented Approach (POA)

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Abstract

The Production-Oriented Approach (POA) prioritises language production and emphasises integrating input and production to promote language learners' communicative competence. While the cognitive and pedagogical aspects of POA have been extensively studied, the emotional experience of teachers remains underexplored. This study investigated tertiary-level foreign language teachers' emotional perceptions in implementing POA and the interactions between emotional, ideological, and institutional factors in this process. Participants of this study were members of a two-year online language teacher training program. The findings of this study revealed that participants in this study experienced, seemingly paradoxically, a combination of positive emotions of motivation, hope, happiness and enthusiasm, and negative emotions of anxiety and frustration. They enjoyed the change brought up by POA: transforming teaching more scientifically and systematically, stimulating and improving students' motivation, and promoting their academic development. At the same time, they were also plagued by the clash between the high demand from POA and the lack of team and institutional support. In this conflict, teachers demonstrated their struggle to manage their emotion labour while striving for professional teaching and academic development through innovating their teaching. By focusing on foreign language teachers' emotions in a newly developed teaching approach in a local context, this study constitutes an important part of the emotion studies and offers valuable insights into the role of emotions in shaping teaching practice and teacher development.

Keywords: language teachers; emotions, Production-Oriented Approach (POA)

Introduction

Teaching is an emotion-laden endeavour. Emotions act as a powerful catalyst for enhancing or impairing teaching. Foreign language teaching, in particular, involves an emotional rollercoaster (Gkonou et al., 2020) because teachers need to speak and teach a language that is not their first language. Language teachers' emotional experiences are not only interwoven with their agency, identity and professional development but also have implications and consequences on learners and classroom practice. In response to the 'affective turn' in applied linguistics, researchers have been trying to drag emotions out of the shadows and cast light on the role of emotions in language teaching. A number of angles have emerged and been focused on, including specific emotions among teachers such as love (Li & Rawal, 2018), caring (Pereira, 2018), anxiety (Ikeda et al., 2020), frustration (Morris & King, 2018), and ecstasies and agonies (McAlinden & Dobinson, 2021); emotions in relation to other personal factors and character strengths such as belief (Barcelos & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018), faith (Ding & De Costa, 2018), motivation (Dewaele, 2020), resilience (Kostoulas & Lämmerer, 2020) and agency (Miller & Gkonou, 2018); and emotional facets such as emotion labour (Benesch, 2017, 2020), emotional intelligence (Gkonou & Mercer, 2017), emotional competence (Madalińska-Michalak & Bavli, 2018), emotional well-being and regulation (Talbot & Mercer, 2018). The findings of these studies have underscored the importance and complexities of teacher

emotions. Among these studies, emotions relating to general language teaching experiences are more frequently investigated, whereas relatively little attention has been paid to emotions engendered from specific teaching approaches and practices.

The Production-Oriented Approach (POA), proposed by Wen Qiufang (2015, 2018b), is a novel language teaching method designed to improve language acquisition by dynamically integrating language production (output) in the learning process. This approach stresses the crucial role of language production in enhancing learners' language skills and highlights the significance of actively involving learners in producing language in authentic communication settings. Representing a shift from input-focused teaching practices to more interactive ones, POA tends to trigger a variety of emotional responses in teachers, which, in turn, may impact their implementation of the approach. Under this circumstance, this study seeks to explore how tertiary-level language teachers perceive their emotions in applying this approach in their language teaching and how social, ideological and institutional factors influence and interact with teachers' emotions in this process.

Literature Review

Language Teacher Emotion

Language teachers' emotions are frequent and diverse, which emerge from their interactions with students, colleagues, institutions and their teaching context. Language teachers may experience positive emotions such as enthusiasm, happiness, and satisfaction due to favouring potentials (e.g., motivated students) as well as negative emotions, including anger, anxiety, and frustration, as a result of disfavouring factors (e.g., excessive workload). Language teachers' emotions can form their perceptions, shape their beliefs, influence motivation, and affect instructional effectiveness and learner achievement (Gkonou et al., 2020). They also play a pivotal role in shaping teacher identity, efficacy and well-being (Nazari & Karimpour, 2023; Wolff & De Costa, 2017). The negative feelings teachers undergo are likely to aggravate stress, lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout, and even threaten one's professional life (e.g., teacher attrition) (Barcelos & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2018). In this case, teachers are encouraged to develop emotional competence and intelligence by undertaking emotion labour and employing emotional regulation strategies (Gkonou & Miller, 2023). Besides this dichotomous view of emotions, the poststructural/discursive approach (Benesch, 2017; Zembylas, 2005) takes into account social, cultural, ideological and political contexts, and power relations in analysing and interpreting emotions. Zembylas (2005, p. 936) argued that emotions viewed through the poststructural lens can "help educators better analyse the complexities of 'emotional rules' (Zembylas, 2002) in teaching and explore the role of emotional practices". Following the poststructural perspective, this study examines the complexities of POA language teacher emotions and the multiple layers of factors that shape their emotions.

Production-Oriented Approach

The Production-Oriented Approach (POA) is an innovative language teaching pedagogy which aims to overcome the weaknesses in tertiary-level English education in Mainland China: text-centred, input-based, and input-output-separated (Wen, 2015). POA starts and ends with production, while input serves as the bridge in between. POA follows the principles of learning-centredness, learning-using integration, cultural exchange and key competency. Teaching hypotheses are the output-driven hypothesis, input-enabling hypothesis, selective-learning hypothesis and assessment for learning. Accordingly, the teaching procedures include three phases: motivating, enabling and assessing. In this teacher-student cooperation process, teachers act as facilitators and consultants who guide, design and scaffold (Figure 1).

POA is currently implemented on a unit-by-unit basis in a course. Each unit is designed with a

major language production objective, which is further divided into several smaller production goals. While following a sequential logical relationship, these goals remain relatively independent and can be completed through a full cycle of "motivating, enabling and assessing" (Wen, 2018b).
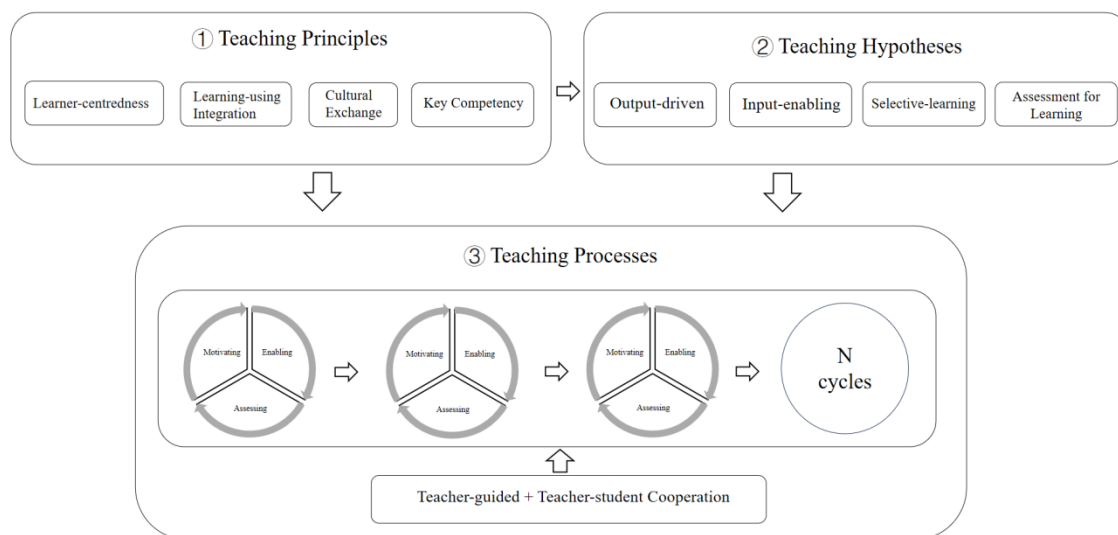
Figure 1. POA theoretical system

In the initial phase of motivating, the teacher introduces communicative scenarios, as in the following example. *You are going to make a speech about what you expect to get from college experience at a workshop which aims to enhance the mutual understanding and communication between Chinese students and international students in your college* (Ji, 2024)[2]. Students are encouraged to try out the cognitively challenging task. The teacher then makes explicit the learning objectives and requirements (e.g., explaining the importance of attending college, understanding better the challenges and opportunities at college, and talking about challenges and opportunities in college life using new vocabulary). In the enabling phase, the teacher divides the large communicative task into several mini-tasks according to the objectives. The teacher then arranges them from less challenging to more challenging, and provides relevant learning materials. Students selectively use these materials to pick up the ideas, language and structures that can be used to practise the mini-tasks. In this process, the teacher gradually reduces the scaffolding until students can accomplish the large productive task independently. An innovative assessment method was proposed in POA — Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment (TSCA) (Sun, 2017; Wen, 2016). In TSCA, the teacher and students collaboratively set up clear and comprehensible criteria and evaluate a few typical examples of students' products in class and the remaining ones after class. TSCA enables students to consolidate what they have learned and identify their weaknesses, thus promoting effective learning.

Previous studies of POA

Since its inception, POA has received a wide range of interest and witnessed a surge in research. The ongoing research of POA theory and practice covers a broad spectrum, including 1) the development of the theory (Wen, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018a, 2018b, 2020b); 2) the design and application of POA in different language courses, such as college English (Yang, 2015), Business English (Xie, 2021), translation (Qi & Sun, 2023), and English for Specific Purposes

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[2] The examples in this paragraph were taken from the college English textbook *iEnglish Integrated Course 1 (Advanced Edition, Smart Version)*.

(ESP) (Yang & Guo, 2022), in non-English language teaching (Cao, 2021; Tang & Hu, 2021), and in different modalities (Zhang, 2022); 3) material development and use (Bi, 2019; Zhan, 2019); 4) the comparison between and combination of POA and other approaches (Wen & Bi, 2020; Zhao & Li, 2021); 5) the effectiveness of POA in language teaching (Sun & Asmawi, 2022; Xuan et al., 2023); and 6) learners (Li et al., 2022) and teachers in POA language teaching (Qiu, 2020; Sun, 2020; Wen, 2020a; Zhang, 2020).

Over the past few years, POA has gradually gained international recognition (Cumming, 2017; Ellis, 2017; Matsuda, 2017; Polio, 2017; Widdowson & Seidlhofer, 2018) and been applied to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts outside China, such as Thailand (Tian, 2019), South Korea (Yin, 2019) and Indonesia (Nur, 2019). A review of the literature indicates that the bulk has mainly concentrated on applying and adapting POA in a variety of language courses. The results suggested that POA is generally suitable for a range of courses in EFL teaching and the approach has proven to be effective in improving learners' language proficiency. Through its emphasis on active production, POA facilitates more meaningful learning experiences, which helps students not only better understand linguistic knowledge but also apply it in real-life contexts. Yet very little research has cast an eye on the practitioners — the teachers who apply POA in the classrooms.

Research on POA teachers

Up till now, there has been only one special issue focusing exclusively on language teacher development in POA. Wen (2020a) constructed a four-level pentagonal pyramid theoretical framework for the development of three experienced POA teachers. The five decisive factors (individuals' self-awareness, self-determination, self-goal, self-action and self-reflection) are at the five points of the bottom pentagon with the environmental factor (professional learning community) at its centre. The four upright levels indicate the four stages of development: exploratory, explanatory, creative and liberating. As teachers' development evolves, individual factors and environmental factors change and interact. Using a self-narrative method, Zhang's (2020) study showed the challenges and achievements in POA practice and revealed the author's professional growth. Through analysing reflective journals, Qiu (2020) also reported her professional development as a novice POA teacher. Similarly, Sun (2020) explored teacher development in Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment. It can be seen that research on other aspects of teachers is completely lacking. As empirical evidence has been documented that POA could contribute to learners' interest, motivation, enjoyment and satisfaction (e.g., Li et al., 2022) as well as anxiety (Wang, 2019), it is, therefore, crucial to examine what teachers think and, more importantly, how they feel in POA teaching. Understanding and addressing these emotional dynamics is essential for optimising the effectiveness of POA. This study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What emotion(s) did language teachers experience in applying POA in their teaching?

2. What were the factors leading to these emotion(s)?

Methodology

The Participants' Pool

Participants of this study were volunteers from a two-year online language teacher training program (Production-Oriented Approach — Virtual Professional Learning Community [POA-VPLC] 2020-2021) in China. The program aimed to promote language teachers' teaching and research skills by focusing on POA. The program was led by Applied Linguist, Professor Qiufang Wen and her POA team and jointly initiated by the National Research Centre for Foreign Language Education of Beijing Foreign Studies University and Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. The agenda of the program comprised three main phases:

studying and learning POA theory (Phase 1), applying POA in classroom teaching practice (Phase 2), and writing relevant Phase 2 teaching-based research papers (Phase 3). In total, 132 teachers from over 90 colleges and universities (one from a high school) participated in this program. The language they taught included nine different languages (English, Korean, Indonesian, Laos, French, German, Arabic, Japanese and Chinese [to international students]), the majority of which was English. Symposiums and group discussions were organised once or twice per month through the Video Conference Software — Tencent Meeting.

Participants, materials and procedures of the study

The study employed a self-compiled Language Teacher Emotion Questionnaire (see Appendix A, adapted from Miller & Gkonou, 2018) and narrative interviews (Barkhuizen, 2021). The questionnaire contained five questions. The first question was intended to elicit some background information. Questions 2 and 3 asked participants to choose six from 24 emotion words and explain the reasons for their choice. Question 4 asked if they had additional emotion words to add. The final question asked participants' willingness to take part in the following interview. The questionnaire was administered in Phase 3 of the program after teachers had finished POA teaching practice in Phase 2. Forty-two tertiary-level teachers (40 females and two males) completed the questionnaire. Their language of instruction included the above 9 languages, among which the majority was English (31 out of 42). They had an average of 13.3 years of teaching experience and 42 weeks of POA teaching experience. They were named from T1 to T42.

The narrative interviews were intended to elicit reflective stories, so during the interviews, participants were invited to tell the researcher about their lived experiences rather than just being asked direct questions. The interviews were conducted two weeks after the completion of the questionnaire. Nine teachers (all female) in the Questionnaire cohort participated in the interviews. Table 1 presents their basic profile. They had an average of 11 years of language teaching experience. Their length of applying POA in language teaching ranged from 16 weeks to 6 years. Some of them already had POA teaching experience before joining this program. It should be noted that tertiary-level English courses in China mainly comprise two categories. The first is *College English*, which is a compulsory course (the training of four skills) for all non-English majors and normally lasts for two years across four semesters. The second is a variety of English courses for English majors, including basic English courses (the training of four skills) in Year one and two and advanced English courses (e.g., Linguistics, Translation, Literature) in Year three and four (Majors of other languages have similar courses). Teachers of English in Table 1 belonged to the first category and teachers of other languages (Indonesian and German) taught language courses specifically for majors of those languages. Due to space limits, data of four teachers (No. 1, 4, 8 and 9 in Table 1) were presented in detail in this paper. A maximum variation principle was followed to capture the diversity of the cohort and document the uniqueness and shared patterns of these teachers. The data were analysed and coded using Excel and NVivo. The coding themes are presented in Appendix B.

Table 1. Profile of the interviewees

No.	Name	Language of instruction	Years of teaching experience	POA teaching experience	Qualification
1	Mei	Indonesian	11	1 year	Masters (PhD candidate)
2	Juan	English	9	6 years	Masters

3	Fen	English	15	2 years	Masters
4	Li	English	2	16 weeks	PhD
5	Xin	English	17	4 years	Masters
6	Qi	English	17	2 years	Masters
7	Dan	English	7	2 years	Masters
8	Yun	German	4	2 years	PhD
9	Ning	English	17	2 years	Masters

Results

Emotions experienced by teachers: Results from the Questionnaire
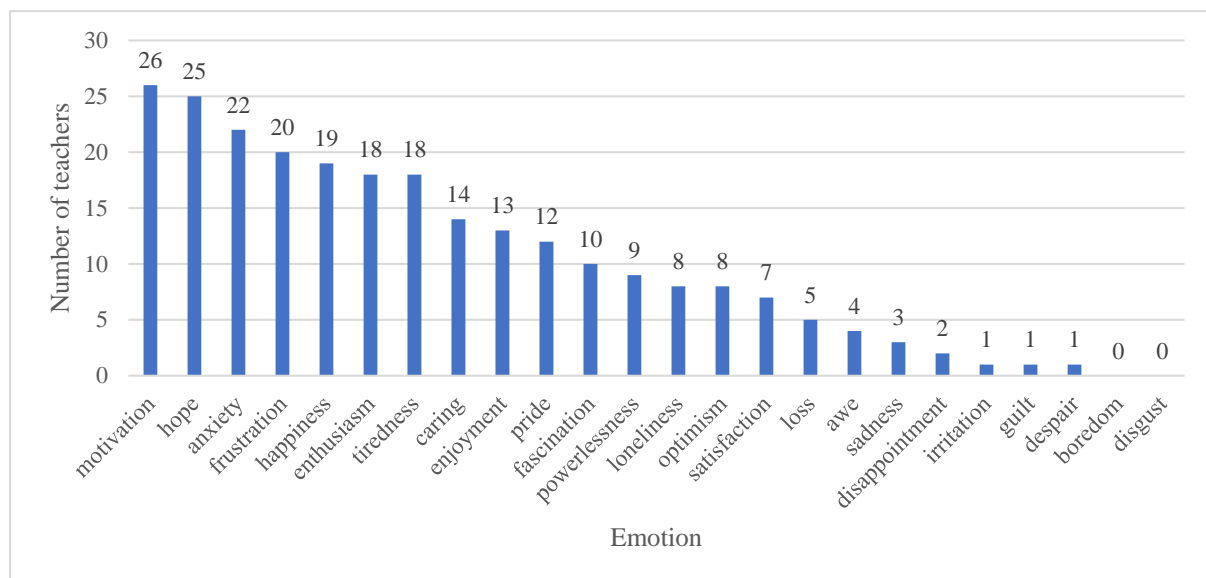
Figure 2. Emotions experienced by teachers (descending order)

The number of teachers selecting each type of emotion is graphically displayed in Figure 2. It is clear that over half of the teachers selected motivation (61.9%), hope (59.5%) and anxiety (52.4%). Other frequently felt emotions were frustration (47.6%), happiness (45.2%), enthusiasm (42.9%) and tiredness (42.9%). In contrast, teachers seldom experienced irritation (2.4%), guilt (2.4%) and despair (2.4%). None of the teachers reported feeling bored and disgusted.

In the answer to question 3 of the questionnaire, the 17 emotion words explained according to the descending order of frequency were anxiety (10 times), hope and motivation (9 times), tiredness and happiness (7 times), loneliness (6 times), frustration, powerlessness, and satisfaction (4 times), disappointment, enjoyment, enthusiasm, optimism, pride (3 times), caring and fascination (2 times), and loss (1 time).

The major reasons for their anxiety were course content (T34), POA design (T1, T4, T26, T28, T32, T39), and effect (T1, T28, T41). They were worried when 1) at the beginning stage they did not know how to adapt the course material and integrate POA into their teaching (T4, T39); 2) at the implementation stage they were not quite certain if their lecture design was strictly following POA theory (T26). They would feel frustrated if they could not think of a good POA teaching plan (T5, T16); 3) POA teaching did not go on smoothly; and 4) the teaching effect did not reach their expectation (T1, T28, T41).

However, they still felt happy, motivated and hopeful for the changes in teaching, students and themselves. First, POA is the localised English teaching theory (T23) and they learned better and more scientific teaching design in this program (T7). As a result, they were less confused about teaching (T15). Second, teachers noticed the changes in students (T37, T42). They reported that POA enabled students to get more involved in classroom activities (T6, T19, T30), thus gaining a higher sense of achievement (T5, T29, T34). They believed POA theory and practice had changed the current teaching situation (T35) and put hope on POA to improve College English teaching (T41). Third, they also gained motivation and hope from peer discussion, help and encouragement within the Virtual POA community (T2, T3, T12, T21, T32, T39).

The feeling of tiredness resulted from the time-consuming and labour-intensive nature of POA. They needed to spend a great deal of time adapting course materials, designing classroom activities and scoring assignments. Especially when the teacher was the only one in the teaching unit adopting POA, a feeling of loneliness would naturally well up in their hearts.

Emotions experienced by teachers: Results from narrative interviews

No. 1 Mei

By the time of the interview, Mei had taught Indonesian to majors of Indonesian for 11 years and had approximately one year (two semesters) of POA experience in a previous POA workshop. In this workshop, she published a journal article based on her experience of employing POA in her teaching. She chose happiness, frustration, enthusiasm, anxiety, motivation and hope in the Questionnaire. She argued that it was hard to describe POA emotions with a few words. It is a microcosm of her academic life, interacting with emotions in life.

1 It's an inspiration for early career scholars to get published no matter how hard the trip was

2 the leading scholars taught you everything

3 sharing between teachers and colleagues

4 self-promotion

5 positive feedback to students

6 continuous pressures

7 real and down-to-earth

8 long-term planning and development

9 move in zigzags and by roundabout ways

10 rise in a spiral

11 We are not on the same starting line

12 part-time PhD

13 course arrangement and schedule

14 What kind of production matches their proficiencies and satisfies the needs of my research

15 multiple difficulties in production

16 utilitarian

17 shortage of course materials

18 coordination

19 input-output ratio

20 People tend to think that knowledge itself is more important

21 enrich the classroom and underscore the key points

22 diversified students

23 teacher-student communication

As Mei herself summarised, two aspects of emotions emerged from her POA experience: positive and negative. However, she argued that they were not binary opposites. "In fact, if a person wants sustainable development, s/he is certain to encounter some negative emotions and s/he needs to coexist with them, resolve them and turn them into positive motivations." Therefore, she referred to this process as "move in zigzags" (Line 9) and "rise in a spiral" (Line 10). Her feeling of happiness originated from her teaching and academic development through POA (Line 4). Academically, she enjoyed sharing with leading scholars (Line 2), communicating with other teachers and colleagues within the POA community (Line 3) and generating research output (Line 1), while pedagogically she promoted her teaching in a more scientific and systematic way and provided more positive feedback to students (Line 5). She was motivated and enthusiastic to be guided by POA, fit POA into her teaching and report her POA reflection and development. Mei also saw hope in her experience of publishing one POA article in a top-ranking journal in China. She explained, "This is from 0 to 1, a very meaningful step." Before this article, she always thought about grafting — applying theories or methodologies of the English language to Indonesian language teaching. Her experience of publishing an article based on her teaching experience gave her a sense of reality (Line 7) and hope for long-term development (Line 8).

The feeling of frustration intermingled with anxiety in Mei's reflection. She identified four major sources of her "negative" emotions. First, the limited scope of students and course resources restricted the application of POA. As a non-lingua franca, only one class of students of Indonesian majors is enrolled every four years in her university and many courses last for only one semester. It is impossible to set a control group and an experimental group with only one class of students, let alone conduct cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. Furthermore, as teaching is split between native Indonesian teachers and Chinese teachers, conducting POA by herself within a set period of time requires coordinating among different teachers and arranging course materials (Lines 18, 19). Second, she had to devote more time and energy to designing appropriate POA tasks and predicting students' difficulties (Lines 14, 15). As a result, she always had the feeling of "devoted more yet gained little" (Line 19), which also caused her confusion: she loved the POA teaching itself, but the gain was not worth the effort. Third, she also felt stressed compared with other teachers doing POA studies of lingua franca (Line 11), such as English which seemed to have a bulk of literature. Meanwhile, she needed to undertake administrative duties and study responsibilities (Line 12). Fourth, a certain percentage of students held a utilitarian view. They preferred the traditional way of learning — teachers teaching and students taking notes. Due to China's "One Belt One Road" initiative, the demand gap for high-end foreign language talents in non-lingua franca is increasing. It was easy for students learning non-lingua franca to find a job after graduation. They were unwilling to bother the effort to prepare a lot in POA.

Mei's narration revealed that POA had shaped her belief in teaching. In the motivating stage, POA encouraged the teacher to design a scenario of real communicative value. It shifted her attention from teaching knowledge (Line 20) to teaching students how to use the knowledge, from teachers' input to students' intake. In the enabling stage, the emphasis on targeting students' production difficulties helped her trim the teaching contents to underscore the key

points (Line 21). Moreover, POA enhanced teacher-student communication (Line 23) as it encouraged teachers to understand what students needed (Line 22).

No. 4 Li

By the time of the interview, Li had been doing her post-doc. Part of her duties included teaching one course to undergraduate students. In the Questionnaire, she had chosen happiness, frustration, tiredness, anxiety, powerlessness and hope. However, she explained that without the restriction of six words, she would add other emotions such as sadness, motivation and caring.

1 reconnected to my alma mater

2 teaching Chinese as a foreign language and teaching English as a foreign language

3 merge POA and classroom teaching practice

4 fixed teaching schedules

5 coordinate with other teachers

6 prepare a lot of teaching materials

7 rules and regulations

8 exam format and requirement

9 professional developments

10 a double degree

11 Students were passionate and enthusiastic about the motivating stage

12 awkward and hard

13 great pressures for students

14 final score

15 promotion and application value

16 teamwork

17 use these principles to guide my teaching

18 the power of motivating

19 service

20 A gentleman should benefit the public when in power

As a graduate of Professor Wen's University, Li felt happy to learn and practise POA. She explained it was a great opportunity to "learn from Professor Wen and reconnect to my alma mater" (Line 1). Before this workshop, she only had a faint idea of POA. She was delighted to gain a deep understanding of the POA theory and practice and felt hopeful for her future professional and academic development (Line 9) on this trip. Nevertheless, the other side of the coin should not be neglected: she was overwhelmed by the emotions of anxiety, frustration, tiredness and powerlessness.

The feeling of anxiety was associated with her current post-doc position. Although Li has a double degree (Lines 2, 10), her major degree was in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. However, part of her post-doc duties and responsibilities was teaching EFL. Li was not confident about EFL teaching, especially when applying POA to the English language teaching. The feelings of frustration and powerlessness were correlated. She felt frustrated

because it was hard to fully integrate POA into classroom teaching practice (Line 3). Courses within her faculty have fixed teaching schedules (Line 4) and exam formats (Line 8). In this mode, teachers did not have much autonomy. They need to coordinate with other teachers of the same course (Line 5). Students were exam-oriented and score-centred. She felt powerless when confronted with these rules and regulations. She also felt tired and exhausted because POA made high demands on teachers and students. It took a great deal of time for her to prepare motivating materials, design enabling tasks and assess assignments, and for students to complete a heavy load of tasks.

Despite these negative feelings she reported, she acknowledged the impact of POA. For example, she would consciously use POA principles to guide her teaching (Line 17) even if she was not strictly following the three phases. Li also emphasised the power of using production to motivate (Line 18) in educational management as she introduced it to her post-doc team. Additionally, she was greatly touched by the POA creator Professor Wen and her team, specifically their caring for foreign language teachers and their mission to promote and advance foreign language teaching in China (Lines 19, 20). However, she restated that the successful application of POA in teaching required the teachers' full preparation as well as the institution's support.

No. 8 Yun

Yun had four years of teaching German to students of German majors. Her POA journey began two years ago when a teacher from her teaching unit introduced POA and conducted POA teaching with her. In the Questionnaire, she selected all positive emotion words: happiness, pride, enthusiasm, motivation, optimism and hope.

1 group work and teamwork

2 pressure and motivation

3 All the efforts are not futile

4 systematic learning

5 exert a subtle influence on

6 compile textbooks

7 time-consuming

8 a heavy workload

9 an appropriate task

10 positive feedback

11 fragmented teaching content

12 help students solve problems

13 learning for using not for exams

14 study for the sake of application

15 put into practice what one has learned

16 advocating POA and introducing POA to more people

17 International Association for German Studies

18 internal motivation and external motivation

Contrary to Mei who felt alone on their POA journey, Yun enjoyed the teamwork in the

teaching unit at her faculty as well as the group work within the POA community (Line 1). The fine division of labour within her unit (three teachers focused on teaching one course: *Comprehensive German*) enabled these teachers to jointly adapt textbooks to POA format, formulate POA lesson plans, conduct POA teaching practice within the course, and collect POA data. At the same time, working and discussing with talented and competent peers gave her pressure but more motivation, happiness and enthusiasm (Line 2) as they set a role model for her. Students' positive feedback also contributed partly to her positive feelings. She felt optimistic and hopeful that she was getting closer to publication (Line 3) on her POA journey. A sense of pride arose when she had the opportunity to learn and practise POA collaboratively and to further export POA at an international conference (Line 16, 17).

Yun believed that POA had a number of implications for her. First, learning and practising POA was not only a comprehensive redesign of the course but also a systematic reorganising of teaching practice and research path. Specifically, POA influenced her imperceptibly in almost every aspect of teaching, such as compiling and adapting textbooks, setting up teaching objectives, and designing classroom activities. Previously, each section of teaching was independent and unrelated (Line 11), but POA integrated them and enabled her to keep reflecting on the objective, content and procedures of teaching. She always bore in mind to make studying and learning serve practical purposes (Lines 12, 13, 14, 15). Second, she admitted that designing appropriate POA tasks and transforming textbooks into POA format was time-consuming and involved a heavy workload (Lines 7, 8) even though they had a team of three teachers. Therefore, in addition to applying POA to their teaching, her team was working on compiling German POA textbooks and attracting more teachers of German to know and practise POA.

No. 9 Ning

Ning had 17 years of teaching experience and was the head of her unit at the time of the interview. She had been following the POA theory ever since its inception. As early as over ten years ago, Ning's university conducted a background survey among graduates and their employers. It was found that the graduates were most impressed by what they had produced during learning while employers also emphasised productive skills such as translating. In a sense, there was a match between students' attention, employers' needs and POA's focus. Ning adhered to one teaching principle: what students have learned in class needs to have a continuation in the future. Ning explained that she experienced mixed emotions using POA and she selected happiness, fascination, pride, anxiety, motivation and hope.

1 learning process

2 teaching is rewarding

3 reorganising teaching

4 formulating and revising teaching plans

5 teaching awards

6 They used to question the meaning of the English subject

7 compact teaching

8 teachers of English majors invited me to teach and supervise their teaching plans

9 provincial-level teaching awards

10 high-ranking journal articles

11 background surveys on the needs of the employers

12 focus on reading and translation

13 Students were very impressed with what they had done

14 teaching innovation projects

15 the perfect implementation of teaching plans

16 heavy teaching loads

17 The effort they devoted was not equal to the scores they got

18 What they learn today can be used in the future

19 This localised theory, like a guidebook, gives us a direction, an action plan

20 teach us how to assess ourselves and others

21 experienced teachers and novice teachers

Ning gained happiness in learning POA theory more logically and profoundly (Line 1) and obtained a sense of achievement in POA teaching (Line 2). She was also motivated by reorganising teaching (Line 3), and fascinated by devising and revising teaching plans (Line 4) and monitoring these plans' being perfectly implemented. She was proud that the little-by-little accumulation of innovative teaching with POA had contributed to her multiple teaching awards (Lines 5, 9), securing funding for teaching innovation projects and recognition from teachers of other disciplines (Lines 6, 7, 8, 14).

The emotional highlands were also counterbalanced by the clashes and conflicts. As Ning is the head of her unit, she has greater autonomy in setting up a new course (e.g., *Academic English*) and deciding on teaching and evaluation methods (e.g., using POA). However, when it came to a compulsory course enrolled by a large number of students (e.g., hundreds or over one thousand), it was hard to implement POA throughout the course when teachers of other classes were not adopting this approach. Students were reluctant to devote extra effort to prepare for the production task which could not be reflected in their final score because the final exam was arranged in the standard test format (mostly reading) (Line 17). Similarly, novice teachers were also unwilling to adopt POA because it was demanding and time-consuming (Line 16).

Ning believed that the great change brought by POA was that it offered an action plan or a teaching manual (Line 19). As an experienced teacher, POA freshened her ideas about pedagogical theory and teaching practice. More importantly, the assessment method (TSCA) in POA provided a new perspective for teachers to assess their own teaching and the teaching of other teachers (Line 20). Furthermore, she saw the hope of publishing articles based on her POA teaching in high-ranking journals in China, which may partially relieve her anxiety in the "publish or perish" atmosphere.

Discussions

Teachers experienced a wide range of emotions on their journey of applying POA to their language teaching. Their feelings about themselves, their teaching, their students and their teaching context were complex, sometimes contrastive, and intertwined with social, cultural and ideological influences. In the following, their emotion spectrum was explored within each specific category and domain.

Teaching

Most teachers reported their motivation and happiness in employing POA. They expressed increasing confidence and enthusiasm in POA-revised classroom practice as POA integrated

teaching objectives, teaching plans and classroom activities and enabled their teaching to be more scientific and systematic. Unlike other teaching methods, POA, stemming from China's context, offered precise, targeted and practical solutions to the weaknesses of tertiary-level language education in China. Teachers were hopeful for POA to improve their teaching. Juan, for instance, was clumsy at transplanting task-based language teaching when confronted with the "input-output separation" problem before she got to know POA. She described the POA creator Professor Wen as a "rescuer", saving teachers like her (from third-tier cities in remote provinces) from their predicament in teaching. Some teachers were also happy and proud that POA-embedded teaching gave them a sense of freshness and achievement, brought them a number of teaching awards and secured funding for their teaching reform projects.

While POA encouraged teachers to develop creativity and innovation in their teaching, it required significant efforts from teachers, thus creating extra work and taking excessive time. The teachers admitted that POA design and implementation were very challenging. They needed to carefully prepare and keep restructuring lessons, lectures and the entire course. The process of finding and adapting materials, designing productive tasks, and evaluating students' work left them tired and exhausted. Sometimes the designed lesson plan or instruction effectiveness failed to reach their expectation. This situation exacerbated their anxiety, leading to their self-doubt and concern about their inadequate ability to learn (the POA theory) and teach (applying the theory).

Students

Students who saw the value of authentic communicative tasks were more willing to participate and share their opinions. This positive feedback was bidirectional in teacher-student interaction. The high level of students' engagement and involvement in classroom activities undoubtedly boosted teachers' confidence and motivation. Teachers grew more empathetic to students' learning. They started to think more about students' needs in lesson planning and tried to create more meaningful and engaging lessons. However, applying POA also meant extra effort from the students. The teachers admitted that it was frustrating not getting support from some students. Their motivation to learn a language was more instrumental and they cared more about their scores. If what was taught through POA would not be covered in the exams, they considered POA as "good but not necessary" and "not worth the time and effort".

Team and institution

Teachers felt encouraged and motivated when gathering with fellow POA members in the virtual community. Yet when they returned to their physical teaching environments, there was a general sense of loneliness and frustration sensed by POA teachers. This loneliness and frustration emerged mainly from lacking teammates and institutional support. First of all, it was hard for teachers who had to coordinate their teaching with other teachers to integrate POA into their teaching. For example, when a course was enrolled by a large number of students, the teaching (to different classes) had to be split among a group of teachers (like Li), or when a course was enrolled by just one class, the teaching needed to split among different teachers according to department regulations (like Mei). In this case, teachers had little autonomy as courses had predetermined lecture schedules and exam formats. In addition, lacking comprehensive and systematic support from faculty and institutional levels, teachers reported that they were sometimes powerless in advancing this teaching reform alone. Secondly, even for teachers who had the authority (e.g., head of the unit/department) to start a new course and determine course schedules and assessment methods, they still desired colleagues with similar interests and POA knowledge to form a team and share the extra workload because POA material compilation, teaching planning and implementation required considerable time and effort.

Research

Owing to the sweeping managerial reform in higher education (Huang & Guo, 2019), institutions have prioritised research publication in the appraisal system. University teachers are under constant pressure to conduct research and publish their studies in the prevailing "up or out" culture. However, some teachers in this study found it difficult to conduct research in language teaching as they were burdened with a number of disadvantages, including a lack of academic training, onerous workloads and limited access to research resources. As a result, when teachers were forced to do research, they felt the bifurcation between teaching and research and the divided professional identity between teacher and researcher.

POA has instilled an idea of deriving research from teaching. Teachers did not have to struggle with research topics beyond teaching. POA acted as a medium through which they accumulated a theoretical foundation and learned research methods of language learning and teaching. The perception of unity and synergy of teaching and research in POA helped them partially relieve anxiety, boosted their confidence and imbued hope in them to produce teaching-informed research. Teachers who already had their POA research outputs expressed pride in their accomplishments. Moreover, research evidence generated from teaching brought vitality to teaching. Teachers' sustained reflection in research provided insights into issues in classroom teaching.

Conclusion

As an emerging teaching approach aiming at resolving problems in tertiary English education in China, POA has become a hot issue among English language teachers and has quickly spread to teachers of other languages. The current study explores the emotional fabrics of language teachers in applying POA in their teaching process.

The findings revealed that a wide range of emotions emerged among teachers, which in turn acted as an agentive power to influence their teaching and research. Teachers' positive feelings arose from authority influence (admiration and excitement for getting close to leading scholars), surged in the positive effects of POA teaching (motivation, happiness and enjoyment for systematic and scientific teaching rationales, practical pedagogical solutions, positive feedback from students, and fruitful teaching awards), and reverberated as an emerging researcher (hope and pride for engaging in research based on theoretically-driven and empirically-based POA teaching). It was also worth mentioning that POA promoted fairness by enhancing teachers' visibility and audibility. Teachers from non-lingua franca backgrounds and peripheral universities were greatly encouraged and invigorated. While enjoying the benefits brought up by POA, teachers also showed negative feelings when confronting obstacles in the implementing process: anxiety about imperfect POA design, implementation and effect; tiredness of the heavy workloads of POA (time-consuming and labour-intensive preparation, design and evaluation), and frustration and powerlessness for resistance from some students (of an institutional motivation) and lacking support from the institutions (no team, fixed teaching schedules and exam formats). Despite all these negative feelings, all the teachers interviewed demonstrated a strong determination to continue applying POA in their teaching. Instead of being overwhelmed by their worries and concerns, they began to adopt a series of strategies to overcome the challenges, such as flexibly employing POA (e.g., using only one phase of POA or all three phases in just one unit/lecture) instead of the entire course, forming teams instead of working alone, and compiling textbooks based on POA instead of spending considerable time adapting a variety of existing materials.

The present study comes with some limitations. The data were collected from a small number of POA teachers within the VPLC community, limiting the generalisation of the results.

Additional insights may be gained by including a larger group of teachers collaboratively conducting POA in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, a follow-up longitudinal investigation of participants in the present study mapping teachers' emotional trajectories may further elucidate their emotional fluctuation and evolution. Also, students' feelings were presented through the lens of teachers' emotions. Future studies could incorporate students to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between teachers' and students' emotions. Notwithstanding the limitations, this study has shed more light on the emotional profile of tertiary-level language teachers in their endeavour to engage in and innovate POA teaching and research practice. More guidance and assistance are needed for their emotional comfort on their POA journey (e.g., POA training programs and seminars, teacher-student communication workshops and personalised institutional support).

Declaration of competing interest:

This paper has no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Appendices

A. Language Teacher Emotion Questionnaire

Thanks for participating in my research. Please fill out the questionnaire about your emotions in applying the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) in your teaching.

1. Basic Information

Years of teaching experience: _____

Gender: _____

The length of applying POA in teaching: _____

The language you teach: _____

The level you teach: _____

2. These are words about emotions. Please select six words that can best describe your emotional experiences in applying POA in your teaching.

happiness	fascination	frustration
caring	sadness	pride
disappointment	enjoyment	irritation
enthusiasm	tiredness	loss
anxiety	boredom	guilt
powerlessness	disgust	awe
despair	satisfaction	motivation
loneliness	optimism	hope

3. Please select two among the six words you have chosen and explain why you selected these two words.

4. Do you have any other emotion words to add?

5. Are you willing to participate in the following interviews?

B. Coding themes

Dimensions	Specific Emotions	Explanations	Examples
Pedagogy	motivated and enthusiastic	a novel teaching approach; authority influence	1) It is an innovative teaching method. 2) The leading scholar taught you everything. 3) I can learn from Professor Wen. 4) Professor Wen and her team cared for foreign language teachers and I am deeply touched by their mission to promote and advance foreign language teaching in China.
	hopeful	the revolutionisation of tertiary-level language teaching	1) It has revitalised language teaching. 2) Learning and practising POA was a systematic reorganisation of teaching practice.
	happy	successful language outcomes; the effectiveness of teaching; a sense of achievement	1) Students were very impressed with what they had done. 2) Teaching is rewarding.
	proud	attaining teaching awards	The little-by-little accumulation of innovative teaching with POA contributed to my multiple teaching awards.
	anxious	lack of confidence in	I'm not sure I understood POA

		using a new methodology	theory, and that I could apply it properly in my teaching.
	tired and exhausted	heavy workloads involved in preparing, adapting and evaluating POA tasks	1) It was time-consuming and involved a heavy workload. 2) POA made high demands on teachers and students.
Teacher-student Interaction	empathic	adjusting teaching to support students' needs	POA encourages teachers to understand what students need.
	motivated and confident	students' interaction in language production	POA enhances teacher-student communication.
	frustrated	students' lack of engagement	1) It's easy for them to find a job after graduation. For them, it's not worth spending so much time doing all those tasks. 2) Students are exam-oriented and score-centred.
Team and institution	encouraged and motivated	collaboration and support from POA Community	1) It's good to communicate with other teachers and colleagues within the POA community. 2) They set a role model for me.
	lonely	insufficient support from peers in teachers' own university	Teachers of other classes were not adopting this approach.
	frustrated and powerless	institutional constraints and limitations: rigid curricula, standardised assessments, lack of resources	1) We had limited course materials and a limited scope of students. 2) We don't have much autonomy.
Research	stressed	pressure to publish	The "publish or perish" atmosphere
	confident and hopeful	contributing to academic knowledge by exploring new pedagogical possibilities; promoting professional development; and securing funding for teaching reform projects	1) It's an inspiration for early career scholars to get published. 2) This is from 0 to 1, a very meaningful step. 3) Teaching with POA helped me secure funding for teaching innovation projects.

Enhancing Students' Awareness on Metadiscourse in the Writing of Current Issues

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Abstract

Metadiscourse is an important linguistic resource to capture the audience's attention because it guides readers throughout the text (Dafouz-Milne, 2008; Hyland, 2005). During the pandemic, Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) news had become a source of information to the public. However, guidelines in reference books, manuals or websites on how to write COVID-19 news were inadequate (Hyland, 2018). Due to the inconsistencies in the word choice, phrases and sentences, misinterpretations occur among the readers. The study aims to investigate the awareness of the metadiscourse features. In the training, pre-test and post-test of Metadiscourse Awareness Test, as well as news with and without metadiscourse together with the writing prompts in the form of Module 1 were given to 30 students to investigate their metadiscourse awareness. The Metadiscourse Awareness Test could be used as the base line results of the metadiscourse awareness. The writing prompts could gather specific information regarding the texts that they had read. Additionally, the constructed texts with and without metadiscourse could be used as a teaching resource. The expected outcomes will create awareness of using metadiscourse correctly to prevent the reporting of inaccurate information, as well as increase readers' engagement to combat misinterpretation of the texts.

Keywords: COVID-19 news, Metadiscourse Awareness Test, metadiscourse features, constructed texts with and without metadiscourse, writing prompts

Introduction

Captivating audiences is essential in every form of reporting. However, writers often neglect to capture readers' interest while presenting important details in media reporting and current events. This occurs as authors usually prioritise their authority, neglecting the readers' interaction with the text (Dafouz-Milne, 2008). One way to engage readers in the text is by employing metadiscourse features. The techniques used by writers to express their thoughts and create trustworthy material are known as metadiscourse features (Crismore, 1989; Hyland, 2005; Mauranen, 1993; Vande-Kopple, 2002). It is paramount to enhance the authors' awareness in the use of metadiscourse when they write about current issues (Seo & Na-Young, 2022). Nevertheless, when students are exposed to the use of metadiscourse, they are not aware of it because they use it wrongly in the text that cause confusion among the readers (Dallagi, 2021). Because of the inconsistencies in wording, phrases, and sentences, readers often misinterpret the text.

Metadiscourse elements can be categorised as either textual or interpersonal. Through the use of logical markers, sequencers, reminders, topicalisers, code glosses, illocutionary markers, and announcements, textual metadiscourse features illustrate the authors' awareness of readers and their desire for clarification, elaboration, guidance, and interaction. Hedges, certainty markers, attributors, attitude markers, and commentaries illustrate interpersonal metadiscourse

features that the author uses to signal readers to the text while showing an awareness of it. This occurs only when the writer has a clear, audience-centred intention for doing so. In other terms, metadiscourse components highlight not just the author's credibility but also the reader's engagement with the text. A comprehensive and innovative module would likely be created to guide writers in effectively producing reports on media and current issues.

There are limited examples or guidelines for creating coherent and cohesive texts; therefore, this study explores textual and interpersonal metadiscourse elements. The topic of writing current issues is discussed only briefly in reference texts or manuals (Sezgin & Topkaya, 2024). The characteristics are vital in helping readers to better understand the texts. Authors can incorporate their own opinions and perspectives into the conversation, enabling them to develop texts via metadiscourse (Chou, Li, & Liu, 2023). While authors have the liberty to share their views and objectives, they could exercise caution when crafting texts.

Hewitt (2002), as well as Hudson and Rowlands (2012) asserted that writers employ metadiscourse to make news engaging, appealing and intriguing. This enables writers to involve readers in the dialogue and demonstrate their expertise on the subject matter, boosting its trustworthiness (Hyland, 2018). It is noteworthy that the analysis of metadiscourse elements in the reporting of current issues receives so little attention (Chung, Crosthwaite, & Lee, 2023; Dynel, 2023; Ren & Wang, 2023; Sezgin & Topkaya, 2024).

The different linguistic elements taken from the report examples will demonstrate metadiscourse in action (Yuryevna, 2012). Roush (2006) asserts that no textbook offers comprehensive guidance for writing and reporting on subjects such as business, finance, markets, and similar areas. Recent graduates typically possess little experience with metadiscourse; therefore, it is pertinent to include formal exposure in the module's lessons (Hodges & Burchell, 2003). This research thus provides an insightful opportunity to improve the awareness of metadiscourse in the context.

Literature Review

The primary focus of most metadiscourse studies is written discourse. Farahani (2018) explained that metadiscourse elements are essential rhetorical features since the book's authors used them extensively to enhance its clarity and coherence for readers. In her research on postgraduate writing, Pronmas (2020) highlighted the importance of introducing new students to genuine texts to enhance their comprehension of writing conventions, especially when employing metadiscourse to improve writing quality. Nugrahani and Bram (2020) suggested that learners could recognise the role of metadiscourse and its functions to guarantee its effective application in their academic writing. This concept resembles the research conducted by Pronmas (2020). Future teaching methods might be determined by the findings of prior research. To make the content more relevant for readers, it is paramount to enhance understanding of metadiscourse in texts.

Various disciplines, such as translation studies, intercultural studies, and gender studies, have examined the characteristics of metadiscourse (Hyland, 1998; Hyland, 1999; Hyland, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Intraprawat & Steffenson, 1995). Most of these studies concentrated on the pragmatic aspect. There are many methods to examine the characteristics of metadiscourse from a syntactic perspective (Hyland, 1998). Dafouz-Milne (2008) conducted a cross-linguistic study of two prominent newspapers to explore the role of metadiscourse markers in the persuasive aspect. Additionally, Noorian and Biria (2010) investigated the utilisation of interpersonal metadiscourse elements in persuasive journalism. Conversely, Thomas and

Finneman (2013) employed journalistic "metadiscourse" to investigate the Leveson Inquiry from its inception through to the conclusion of its hearing phase. Kuhi and Mojood (2014) examined the influence of cultural factors and general norms on the usage and distribution of metadiscourse within one genre (written in English and Persian) across 60 newspaper editorials.

Several studies focused on reports and news that examined the social representations and symbolic coping of the COVID-19 pandemic in newspapers (Phillips & Cassidy, 2024), in addition to analysing communication ecology of pandemic reporting (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). These investigations did not concentrate on examining metadiscourse characteristics in writings. In other words, the studies analysed other features in the COVID-19 pandemic reporting, but the metadiscourse features were not investigated. Consequently, this study examines textual and interpersonal metadiscourse due to the scarcity of examples or guidelines for composing coherent and cohesive texts. Understanding the features of metadiscourse is relevant to assist readers in comprehending the texts more effectively. By employing metadiscourse, authors can highlight their authority or position in order to express their views and attitudes (Wan & Yi, 2023). Nonetheless, there are no sufficient guidelines in reference books, manuals, or online sources on how to explicitly write news (Hyland, 2018). This will lead readers to misinterpret a text due to varying word selection, phrases, and sentences. Consequently, it is pertinent for the students' writing to be improved through the training sessions, as metadiscourse would aid in preventing misinterpretation of the texts. This is due to the fact that a complicated concept can be expressed with only one metadiscourse element, allowing readers to accurately decipher and understand the sentence's meaning within the texts. Thus, the authors' credibility and the readers' involvement are crucial to analyse and improve, making the texts clearer and more accessible to readers.

According to the studies mentioned earlier, there have been limited investigations into both textual and interpersonal metadiscourse in reports and news. Hooi, Tan, Lee, and Victor Danarajan (2020) conducted a study to examine the awareness of business news writers at *The Star Online* and *Focus Malaysia* regarding the utilisation of metadiscourse characteristics. Their study demonstrated the significance of metadiscourse elements in business news, in which it was found that the authors made the most of them in the journalism field. During the training sessions, the Metadiscourse Awareness Test may be utilised to assess students' comprehension of metadiscourse and improve their awareness of using metadiscourse correctly in their writing. The validated writing prompts were capable of collecting particular data about the texts the students had read. Furthermore, the created texts that contain metadiscourse and those that do not could serve as a teaching tool in the writing class. Consequently, this organised training programme for students will help them learn to effectively use metadiscourse in their writing to maintain quality education (Chow, Hooi, & Wilson, 2024; Fife, 2018). There was also a lack of intervention-based studies. To date, Chow, Hooi and Wilson (2024) conducted a study on metadiscourse features awareness, in which an intervention process was done in a form of news with and without metadiscourse, as well as writing prompts. Their study revealed that the intervention process was effective for the journalism students to enhance their metadiscourse awareness in crisis news. On a contrary, Hooi, Tan, Lee, and Victor Danarajan's (2020) study in metadiscourse area did not use the intervention process to investigate the metadiscourse awareness in the text. Henceforth, it would be better to have an intervention process to ensure that the metadiscourse awareness is enhanced among the participants, so that there will not be disjointed and incoherent text.

Even though metadiscourse elements are utilised, students occasionally employ them inappropriately. This is due to the possibility that they could use these features without realising

it; hence, they do not recognise the roles the text takes on, leading to a lack of coherence and engagement. In this study, the research question is: "To what extent are the students aware of the use of metadiscourse features?"

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study encompassed 30 Form 4 students in a private school. The students were selected purposively, in which they would need to take Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) in 2025. These students, who were above-average in their studies, were chosen according to the results of the English language examination. This was due to their ability to convey their reactions clearly when reading the chosen news articles. The authorities from the school were contacted to obtain their permission to include the students in the research. The students also provided their consent to join in the study.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework used in this study was Dafouz-Milne's (2008) model. The model comprises two dimensions, which are textual and interpersonal metadiscourse. Textual metadiscourse serves to emphasise the writers' authority, while interpersonal metadiscourse helps to highlight the readers' engagement. There are seven categories of textual metadiscourse that include logical markers, sequencers, reminders, topicalisers, code glosses, illocutionary markers, and announcements. In contrast, there are five categories of interpersonal metadiscourse that encompass hedges, certainty markers, attributors, attitude markers, and commentaries.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

To ensure the reliability of the data analysis, two inter-raters were utilised to evaluate the Metadiscourse Awareness Test together with the news with and without metadiscourse, as well as the writing prompts. Ambiguous wording and faulty sentence construction were detected and adjusted, as needed. Later, the Metadiscourse Awareness Test together with the news with and without metadiscourse, as well as the writing prompts were pilot tested with seven students. A reliability assessment was performed to evaluate the internal consistency of the Metadiscourse Awareness Test items. The Cronbach's alpha value for the Metadiscourse Awareness Test items was 0.804. Consequently, the Metadiscourse Awareness Test items were deemed reliable and subsequently utilised in the study.

The Metadiscourse Awareness Test, news with and without metadiscourse together with the writing prompts in the form of Module 1 were given to 30 students to investigate their metadiscourse awareness in the training. The Metadiscourse Awareness Test could be used as base line results of the metadiscourse awareness. Additionally, the constructed texts with and without metadiscourse could be used as a teaching resource. The writing prompts could gather specific information regarding the texts that they had read.

The Metadiscourse Awareness Test, which was the main quantitative data collection, was adopted from Chow, Hooi and Wilson's (2024) study (see Appendix). The test consisted of 12 multiple choice question items with an extract for each item. The purpose of this test was to investigate the students' awareness in identifying the metadiscourse features for all items. This was done because the students were not aware of the functions of the metadiscourse features;

thus, they would use these features incorrectly in the text, making the points in the text incoherent and disjointed. The duration of the test was set to be 15 minutes.

There were two sets of constructed texts used, in which one set of the texts analysed the textual metadiscourse (adapted from *The Star*), and another set of texts analysed the interpersonal metadiscourse (adapted from *The Edge*). These two sets of news articles had a common theme, which was about the COVID-19 issue. Pertaining to the texts that examined the textual metadiscourse, News 1 was the news without textual metadiscourse, while News 2 was the news with textual metadiscourse. This set of news was administered to the students after the administration of the Metadiscourse Awareness Test, and the students would need to provide their responses on the writing prompts in the first hour. With regards with the texts that examined the interpersonal metadiscourse, News 3 was the news without interpersonal metadiscourse, while News 4 was the news with interpersonal metadiscourse. The students would also need to give their reactions to the texts read on the writing prompts in the second hour.

In this paper, only quantitative findings from the Metadiscourse Awareness Test were analysed by using the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 and would be reported at the Results and Discussion section. The scores were determined by using descriptive statistics. This was done to determine the students' level of English proficiency in writing.

It should be emphasised that this current study constitutes a minor component of a broader study. Henceforth, a triangulation of data took place, in which the qualitative results from the writing prompts were examined by utilising the ATLAS.ti version 9 software to complement the quantitative findings from the Metadiscourse Awareness Test. The students' responses from the writing prompts were collected and reviewed as required. The replies were classified based on the elements of the writing prompts. The replies to the writing prompts were assigned codes, which encompassed logical markers, sequencers, reminders, topicalisers, code glosses, illocutionary markers, announcements, hedges, certainty markers, attributors, attitude markers, and commentaries to assist in the examination of metadiscourse characteristics. The codes assigned to the students ranged from Student 1 to Student 30, depending on their responses. Given that the students were separated into six groups, these groups were labeled as Group 1 through Group 6 for simplified data analysis.

Results and Discussion

Metadiscourse Awareness Test was used to investigate the students' awareness of metadiscourse features in writing. The Metadiscourse Awareness Test scores are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Students' pre-test scores

Students	Pre-test Scores (%)
1	83.33
2	50.00
3	50.00

4	50.00
5	58.33
6	58.33
7	66.67
8	50.00
9	58.33
10	58.33
11	50.00
12	66.67
13	58.33
14	50.00
15	50.00
16	50.00
17	33.33
18	66.67
19	75.00
20	58.33
21	41.67
22	50.00
23	41.67
24	58.33
25	50.00
26	50.00
27	58.33
28	33.33
29	50.00
30	75.00

From Table 1, the results revealed that the highest score was exhibited by Student 1 with 83.33 per cent, while the lowest score was exhibited by Students 17 and 28 with 33.33 per cent. Most students (40.00%) scored 50.00 per cent, while only one student (3.30%) scored 83.33 per cent.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the students' pre-test scores

Mean	54.9993
Std. Deviation	11.28689
Variance	127.394
Skewness	.442
Std. Error of Skewness	.427
Kurtosis	.668
Std. Error of Kurtosis	.833
Range	50.00
Minimum	33.33
Maximum	83.33

Table 2 shows that the average score was 55.00 per cent and the standard deviation was 11.29. The value of skewness was .442 and the value of kurtosis was .668. This shows that the results were in normal distribution (Byrne, 2010; Hair et al. 2010).

In the Metadiscourse Awareness Test, Item 1 tested the students on their ability to identify the commentary category. This category was in the form of a question. It was observed that most of the students could identify this category correctly. The use of the question was helpful to draw the attention of the readers to ensure that they would be interested in the content of the text. For Item 2, it was to analyse the students' awareness in identifying the logical marker category. It was noted that the students answered "so" instead of "as well as" that made the answer wrong. This is because the logical "as well as" was used to connect two complete ideas together to signify the addition of points in the sentence. The use of the logical marker "so" was to connect the cause and effect together in the sentence. Since the function was to connect two complete ideas together in the sentence, the answer to Item 2 would be "as well as". The use of the logical marker was to ensure that the readers would be able to follow the thoughts of the writer. It was noted that the authors established links between various parts of the information in the text (Hooi, Tan, Lee, & Victor Danarajan, 2020). This will enhance the students' language awareness following the intervention process used in the training, enabling them to recognise the language features necessary for writing manuscripts correctly and preventing any misinterpretation of the texts by the readers.

Pertaining to Item 3, the next category, which was on hedges, was analysed. The answer to the item should be "would" because it was used as a helping verb in conjunction with a main verb to express shades of mood for the government to take the prudent steps before declaring the transition to the endemic phase. The hedge "may" could not be the answer because it would be used to ask for permission or consent instead. For the hedge "could", it would be used to make recommendations to be done instead of actions to be taken. Authors employed hedges to reconcile the truth and assertions with potential counterarguments from readers, while also softening facts or personal beliefs based on certain evidence to evade personal responsibility. Hedges were used to demonstrate that the writer mitigated commitment to the truth of the propositions because he or she did not have the actual knowledge on the information or subject matter (Abdullah, Rahmat, & Zawawi, 2020). This will guarantee that the students will

understand from the module on how to captivate readers by using language properly in their writings.

Item 4 would be on the identification of the topicaliser category. For this topicaliser category, some of the students answered wrongly by choosing the option on "For students' discovery in new things". This was because in the sentence, it was mentioned that the students were discovering the value of deep learning from learning to play the violin to deciphering advance physics, but there was no mention of "discovering new things". Hence, the answer to Item 4 should be "For students' way of learning". The topicaliser was used to give emphasis to a new topic within the text. This transition served as a significant indicator within the text to illustrate writers' efforts to make sure readers managed to accurately understand the authors' arguments and concepts (Hyland, 2005). This happens because students typically possess the content; however, due to insufficient language features, confusion arises about whether the points relate to the main idea, explanation, or examples. This part is not taught in the class and should be included in the curriculum or syllabus of the English writing lessons.

With regards to Item 5, the students were tested on the category of certainty marker. In the sentence, it was shown that there was a certainty through this clause that "a sacrifice would be seen among the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) members". Thus, the answer should be "clearly" instead of "undoubtedly", in which most of the students chose that. The metadiscourse "undoubtedly" would be a form of attitude marker to empathise with the readers' situation which not the function of this sentence. The certainty marker was used to make the text more credible and reliable (Rabab'ah, Yagi, & Alghazo, 2024). Item 6 tested the students to identify the illocutionary marker category. In this case, this category was used to emphasise the writer's act in the text, which was "I hope". This was used to stress on the writer's voice or claim in the text (Fang, 2023). The training's outcome indicating that metadiscourse features are utilised more often following the intervention process could serve as a glossary of linguistic forms. The students will be able to identify the accurate words, phrases, or sentences in order to prevent any misunderstanding among the readers. This is due to the fact that language features cannot be used interchangeably but are applied based on the contexts and settings.

In respect of Item 7, the category that was tested was on attitude markers. The answer should be "interestingly" because it was used to correspond with the readers' feelings on the issues in the text. The use of the attitude marker was for the writer to convey his or her feelings towards an issue in the text. Through the use of attitude markers, writers can emphasise their expertise or stance to convey their opinions and perspectives (Wan & Yi, 2023). Item 8 was constructed to analyse the students' awareness of the announcement category. The announcement was essential to inform that there were problems with the contractor at the residential area. Therefore, the answer to Item 8 would need to relate to the problems in the announcement of that paragraph. The announcement was used to keep the readers excited for what would be written by the writer next in the text (Pearson & Abdollahzadeh, 2023). From the module used in the training, the students manage to step into the readers' perspective to determine if they grasp what they have expressed in their writings.

For Item 9, the identification was on the category of attributor. This was important to note that the attributor was used to evoke trust for the readers because there were citations from important people. Nugrahani and Bram (2020) mentioned that attributors are pivotal linguistic elements in writing because citation of other writers' work provides credibility to the writer's own writing. It was noted that most of the students answered correctly, which was "the Ministry of Health said that". Item 10 tested on the identification of the code gloss category. The answer should be "like" because it was used in the middle of the sentence to provide examples or illustrations to ensure that the readers understood the message the writer would want to convey.

The answer could not be "for example" and "in other words" because there would be a comma or a full stop before these metadiscourse features. The code gloss would be pertinent to be used to explain to the readers by giving a context or a background especially those who had no background knowledge on the subject area. Additional examples and clarifications, along with reading prompts, were incorporated in the form of code glosses (Dafouz-Milne, 2008). It is pertinent for the students to understand how to support their writing with appropriate illustrations and examples, ensuring that while they write as authors, they also comprehend the texts as readers.

With regards to Item 11, the category that was tested was on reminders. The context before the reminder was used included factors. Hence, the reminder category should be related to the factors that were mentioned before. The reminder was used for the readers to refer back to previous sections in the text (Swarts, 2022). For Item 12, the students were tested on the sequencer category. The answer to Item 12 should be "another" because it was another issue after the first issue about the traumatic family separations was mentioned. The sequencer was used to arrange the flow of events and order the series in the text (Dallagi, 2021). It is fundamental for the students to understand on how to ensure their points transition smoothly from one to another, clearly differentiating between the main idea, explanation, and elaboration with supporting examples. This occurs because students typically possess the content, but the absence of linguistic features can lead to confusion about which points pertain to the main idea, explanations, or examples. Therefore, this should be taught in lessons.

Conclusion

The finding that the authors' understanding of metadiscourse enhanced after the intervention would help them to identify the metadiscourse features that can be applied in manuscript writing, guaranteeing the correct application of metadiscourse to avoid any confusion for readers. This would ensure that the educators concentrate on clarity and audience engagement while addressing current subjects in the text with suitable organisation and emphasis (Hyland, 2022). Another finding elucidates that the writing prompts, together with the texts produced that include and exclude metadiscourse, may serve as a method to improve writers' understanding of how to use metadiscourse effectively (Bourdin & Fayol, 2022). This would ensure that they grasped how to engage with their audience by utilising metadiscourse effectively in their writing. The authors would share their insights with others through their understanding of metadiscourse, clarity, reader engagement and grasp of metadiscourse use.

For the students, it was difficult to find them since they attended various classes and had differing schedules. It is recommended that future studies be carried out on a broader scale by involving more students, enabling the results to be generalised. Additionally, this may help course instructors create better resources for professionals, guaranteeing that students receive a certain level of structured guidance from their teachers (Ramasamy, Mohamad, Sanmugam, & Hooi, 2025). The different language characteristics taken from the report samples would provide a useful example of metadiscourse in action (Yuryevna, 2012). The results of this study may also elevate authors' understanding of how to connect with readers through their content. The appropriate expression of news incorporating metadiscourse elements by writers can improve the texts' clarity and increase readers' engagement with the material (Noorian & Biria, 2010). To assess whether the ideas and material in the reports would be understandable to readers, an analysis of metadiscourse is performed (Kuhi & Mojood, 2014). As a result, this study provides writers with valuable knowledge about metadiscourse. Furthermore, the findings may provide writers with essential insights, a passion for language, and a curiosity

regarding text organisation (Arnold, 1991; Breen, 1985; Canado & Esteban, 2005; Morrow, 1977). Kaur (2013) noted that it is fundamental for course instructors to involve students in significant learning experiences throughout the varied courses offered by the institution. Considering the importance of producing texts in a professional context, the findings indicate students' awareness of metadiscourse elements. As a result, the findings contribute to the study of current issues writing.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix

METADISCOURSE AWARENESS TEST

Select the correct answer.

Item 1

> For many months, the US Federal Reserve had argued that the rising inflation was transitory, effectively playing down the risks. The same chorus was echoed by the European Central Bank and, for a while, even the International Monetary Fund. What is really surprising is the fact that the major central banks have themselves been surprised and caught unawares, despite their years of ultra loose monetary policies, repressed interest rates and unprecedented stimulus.
>
> 1. _____ Even now, with 7.5% inflation, QE is still ongoing, albeit at a lower quantum. Many in the US government and academia already think the Fed is behind the curve with inflation.
>
> *(Adapted from My Say: Central Banks May Have Worked Themselves into a Corner, Opinion, The Edge Markets, Obiyathulla Ismath Bacha, 24 February 2022)*

1. A. How will inflation be reduced?

B. Does inflation affect other banks?

C. Why is inflation such a big surprise?

D. I do not know.

Item 2

Stock markets in Asia tumbled into technical correction, with some falling into bear market territory, over the week as investor sentiment turned cautious on geopolitical concerns 2. _____ the impending rate hike by the United States Federal Reserve (Fed) remained unstable.

The benchmark FBM KLCI yesterday rose for a second day, gaining 4.03 points to close at 1,520.02. On Wednesday, it tumbled close to the psychological 1,500-point ark at 1,503.34 before recouping some losses to close at 1,508.91.

In total, the index, which comprises 30 largest companies by market capitalisation, had lost about 0.4% over the week. Year-to-date, the index had shed about 3%. The FBM KLCI could test the 1,500-point level in the short term, an analyst tells StarBizWeek, citing growing uncertainty.

(Adapted from Pressure on Equity Market, Business News, The Star, Cecilia Kok, 29 January 2022)

2. A. so

   B. but

   C. as well as

   D. I do not know.

Item 3

Two years into COVID-19, the pandemic is not over yet. But more countries are prepared to move into the endemic stage, though there has been a resurgence in global coronavirus cases. With rising global vaccination rates, healthcare experts suggest that it is time to treat the virus as a seasonal flu.

At the same time, the reopening of borders has been on the agenda of many countries, including Malaysia, where the National Recovery Council has suggested to fully open the borders as early as March 1 without the mandatory quarantine requirement. Senior Minister (Defence) Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Hussein said last Thursday the proposal was still being discussed as it involves various ministries and has to be deliberated by the cabinet. This was followed by Minister of Health Khairy Jamaluddin's remarks last Friday that the government 3. _____ take prudent steps before declaring the transition to the endemic phase.

(Adapted from Cover Story: Omicron-influenced Behaviour to Dominate Recovery, Corporate, The Edge Markets, Lee Weng Khuen, 24 February 2022)

3. A. may

B. could

C. would

D. I do not know.

Item 4

Students are required to complete an Independent Learning Project, combining their newfound innovation and emotional intelligence skills with a commitment to serve.

Here, they would work with the community, enabling active learning and to acquire valuable life lessons by using ethical research approaches to solve problems in the community.

Moreover, Charterhouse Malaysia also gives students the time to explore their own academic and personal strengths and   passions.

4._____, the school is ever ready to assist students in discovering the value of deep learning from learning to play the violin to deciphering advanced physics.

Furthermore, the school believes all its students are leaders. So once enrolled, students are automatically members of the Charterhouse Forum, which acts as a vehicle for them to explore leadership opportunities.

(Adapted from Gearing up for a New Reality in Education, Education, The Star, Starpicks, 31 January 2022)

4.   A. For students' way of learning

 B. For students' discovery in new things

 C. For Charterhouse Malaysia accrediting smart students

 D. I do not know.

Item 5

> The fact that many ordinary Malaysians were willing to give time and money to help their fellow Malaysians, regardless of race or religion, was one bright spot amid the pain and hardship brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Would Malaysians also be willing to help out fellow Malaysians when it comes to their retirement savings?
>
> One of many ways policymakers could find out is to ask the top 0.5% of the 14.9 million Employees Provident Fund (EPF) members who collectively had 12.4% of the savings managed by the provident fund at end-2020.
>
> 5. _____, a sacrifice would be seen among EPF members with more than RM1 million saved with the provident fund. Based on *The Edge*'s assumed tiered dividend rate, someone with RM1 million in savings would see the effective yield fall to 4.4% on a tiered rate, compared with the existing flat rate of 5.09%.
>
> *(Adapted from Would Multimillionaire EPF Savers Help Poorer Members?, Corporate, The Edge Markets, Cindy Yeap, 24 January 2022)*

5. A. Clearly

B. Significantly

C. Undoubtedly

D. I do not know.

Item 6

> With the COVID-19 pandemic situation now much better than it was a year ago, many families are yearning to have a smashing reunion feast for the upcoming Chinese New Year. Swiss Garden Beach Resort Kuantan had prepared two festive food promotions to mark the joyous and meaningful occasion.
>
> The Sou Kong package caters to business groups and private companies wishing to treat and reward their staff for a job well done over the past year. As for the Reunion package, it is meant for family members to get together and look forward to prosperity and good health.
>
> My culinary team has put together a host of appetizing dishes to meet the needs of guests and walk-in diners. 6. _____ to play a part in livening up the festive atmosphere and putting smiles back on faces after two years of hardship.

(Adapted from Scrumptious Meals Sure to Bring Smiles Back on, Food, The Star, Simon Khoo, 27 January 2022)

6. A. I hope

B. You hope

C. They hope

D. I do not know.

Item 7

There is only one way to put it — 2021 has been an eventful year for oil and gas prices, after years of underperformance compounded by the pandemic-induced bloodbath at the start of the decade. For the first time in three years, Brent crude oil prices breached the US$80 per barrel (bbl) mark, while natural gas prices rose more than 150% to the highest in seven years at above US$6 per metric million British thermal unit (MMBtu).

While research agencies agree that supply will likely outstrip demand in 2022, forecasts for demand — still impacted by pandemic issues like international travel restrictions — have diverged following the Omicron variant outbreak. 7. _____, Opec has revised upward its demand forecast in 1Q2022 by 1.1 million bpd, partly arising from the delay in 4Q2021 recovery induced by the virus resurgence, with a view that inventory replenishment will support the market.

(Adapted from A Good Run for O&G in 2021, Tested by Omicron, Corporate, The Edge Market, Adam Aziz, 11 January 2022)

7. A. Admittedly

B. Fortunately

C. Interestingly

D. I do not know.

Item 8

"We understand that the monsoon drains come under the purview of JPP," he added.

> JPP director Zaireezal Ahmad Zainuddin also blamed the lackadaisical attitude of workers involved in cleaning the drains and cutting the grass.
>
> 8. _____ .
>
> "MPK has issued a stern warning to the contractor to desilt the drains, sweep the residential roads once a week and cut the grass twice a month," he said.
>
> Zaireezal added that MPK would ensure the supervisor monitors cleaning works in the area. "We may remove the contractor if this issue persists," he said.
>
> *(Adapted from Flash Floods Caused by Clogged Drains, Lifestyle, The Star, Edward Rajendra, 31 January 2022)*

8. A. There is a *gotong-royong* carried out by the neighbourhood every month

   B. There is cleaning as a daily routine that is done in the neighbourhood almost every month

   C. There are initial findings that show that the contractor for Taman Sentosa Phase One does not have a full crew as per the agreement

   D. I do not know.

Item 9

> Recognising that the Malaysian economy cannot afford another lockdown, and taking a cue from its vaccine rollout earlier this year, the government has been responding fast to combat the Omicron variant. It began offering booster shots in October to prevent another wave of COVID-19 infections.
>
> In fact, following the World Health Organisation's recent warning that the Omicron variant poses a "very high" global risk, 9. _____ it will accelerate the rollout of the booster shots to 150,000 per day from 120,000 previously. It will then be increased in stages to 200,000 doses per day.
>
> MoH's website shows that 4.88 million people in Malaysia have got their booster shots as at Dec 21.
>
> *(Adapted from Cover Story: Will COVID-19 Boosters Become the Norm?, Corporate, The Edge Market, Syafiqah Salim and Kang Siew Li, 10 January 2022)*

9.   A. the report declared that

B. the Ministry of Health said that

C. the World Health Organisation presented that

D. I do not know.

Item 10

It is also able to destroy influenza virus such as H1N1 (Swine Flu); hand, foot and mouth disease viruses including HFMD (Coxsackievirus A16), as well as bacteria 10. _____

E. Coli, MRSA and Staphylococcus Aureus.

NPM group managing director Yaw Seng Heng said, "The new products are part of the group's endeavour in keeping everyone safe indoor. It is formulated with Silver Ion Technology, which is skeptically proven to destroy 99.9% of harmful viruses and bacteria on painted surfaces.

"As the number one paint in Malaysia and Asia, the anti-viral and anti-bacterial range from Nippon Paint is part of our continuous efforts to create safer indoor space for everyone for their homes, workspaces and public premises."

(Adapted from Keeping Your Home Safe, Starpicks, The Star, 7 January 2022)

10. A. like

B. for example

C. in other words

D. I do not know.

Item 11

The new norms arising from the COVID-19 pandemic are not only affecting our lives but the food markets too. Just as our lives are about to "normalise", food prices have spiralled beyond our imagination.

To understand the evolution of the phenomenon, the price hike issue can be sliced up into three components. First, the increasing trend is largely due to an imbalance in fundamentals, where demand is chasing supply. Second, "excessive increase" in price is corollary to market power emanating from a highly concentrated or non-competitive market structure. Third, the ground on which market participants interact is clouded with uncertainty due to the advent of the COVID-19 shock, which was unprecedented and unexpected. Other technical factors include COVID-19 mitigation measures that disrupted the supply chain of goods (including inputs) globally and locally.

The convergence of 11. _____ has created an inflationary effect worldwide and Malaysia has not been spared. The ability to absorb the price shock depends on the state of the food sector of the country. A net food exporter country may be able to handle it better than a net importer like Malaysia.

(Adapted from My Say: Let the Next Golden Crop Be Grown for Food, Opinion, The Edge Market, Fatimah Mohamed Arshad, 24 December 2021)

11. A. the issues presented before

B. the factors mentioned above

C. the measures discussed previously

D. I do not know.

Item 12

On her first night in the United States, Hernandez shared a bed with her daughters, gazing at them as they slept and marveling at how much they had grown.

"So many years without seeing them," she said to Reuters this month, her voice shaky from crying. "They are so big now."

The Trump administration contended that allowing families to be released together in the United States while they applied for asylum only encouraged illegal immigration. In response, the administration sought to prosecute and deport parents like Hernandez and place their children in U.S. custody as "unaccompanied minors."

There were several problems that occurred. The first issue was traumatic family separations began in 2017. 12. _____ was any official announcement was captured in the media worldwide and caused international outcry. Trump, a Republican, reversed course with an executive order ending the practice in June 2018.

(Adapted from Split up at the U.S.-Mexico Border, Family Finally Reunites, World, The Star, Mica Rosenberg and Carlos Barria, 31 January 2022)

12. A. Then

B. Next

C. Another

D. I do not know.

The Rhetoric of Letters to the Editor: A Systematic Functional Approach

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Abstract

Letters to the editor (LTEs) are considered as a platform of media discourse, serving as an important avenue for public engagement and perspective exchange on important societal issues. However, this form of communication remains under-researched, as reflected in the study's literature review. Accordingly, the present study analyzes the rhetorical pattern and elements in several LTEs published in the Toronto Sun newspaper, using the Generic Structure Potential (GSP) model drawn from the Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1998). The qualitative analysis explored seven key rhetorical elements—Run-on Headline (RH), Background Information (BI), Addressing an Issue (AI), Initiating Argumentation (IA), Argumentation (A), Concluding Remarks (CR), and Articulating a Solution (AS). These elements together form the rhetorical structure RH^[(BI).AI]^[(IA)^A]^[(AS).(CR)], which enhances the overall coherence and persuasive impact of texts. Utilizing the GSP model, the study tends to examine how rhetorical elements are arranged within LTEs to involve readers and create public opinion. The findings can significantly provide insights into the construction of persuasive communication within LTE sub-genre. This study also contributes to the understanding of the planned organization of rhetorical elements, underscoring significant implications for pedagogy, journalism, media studies, and among other fields.

Keywords: Systematic Functional Linguistics, Generic Structure Potential, rhetorical pattern, letters to the editor, Toronto Sun newspaper

Introduction

Rhetoric, the persuasive art, has remained a fundamental cornerstone of communication for centuries, shaping the way individuals influence public opinion and convey meaning through language. Rhetoric acts as a pivotal tool in both spoken and written discourse and therefore it is significantly relevant in today's media as it streamlines public opinion and encourages societal dialogue (Wijaya and Bram, 2022). Letters to the editor (LTEs), a classic yet vigorous sub-genre of media exemplify the use of rhetoric in public discourse. LTEs offer a broad platform for citizen journalists to raise their concerns, advocate for a better society, and involve in public communication, making them suitable candidates for rhetorical analysis (Hayek et al., 2020).

An Analysis LTEs from the Toronto Sun provides precious insights into the human communication and persuasive strategies writers use (Khalaf & Khalaf, 2023). The current research unravels and analyzes the rhetorical elements embodied within these letters and elaborates how these elements are sequenced to shape a pattern, accomplishing persuasion, as advocated by Casal and Kessler (2020) in their corpus-based rhetorical analysis. As a matter of

fact, rhetorical elements, their sequencing, and pattern contribute to understanding how public opinion is shaped and how ordinary people take part in democratic procedure in making changes in their society through written discourse and rhetoric (Bhatia, & Bremner, 2012).

The fields of rhetoric and writing have gone through a recent resurgence. This combination seems to improve the persuasion and effectiveness of written discourse (Fiskvik et al., 2023). Rhetoric manifests itself in patterns; employs sequence to help audiences better realize and accept the main intent of writers even in English as a foreign language classroom and plurilingualism (Coyle & Meyer, 2021). This realization may lead to a) crystallized text comprehension for readers and b) a more effectively persuasive piece of text for authors. It is apparent that rhetorical elements, patterns, and their sequence influence English writing (Fartousi & Al-Smadi, 2024). Today, the roles of these three factors –rhetorical elements, patterns, and their sequence - in how writers configure, develop, and present their written texts are inevitable (Awoyemi & Ajayi, 2023).

The existing literature, replete with academic works, has examined the analysis of newspaper headlines, editorials, with notable contributions from Naji (2022), Kyaw and Zhiying (2019), Fartousi (2012), and Ansary and Babaie (2004). Despite the insightful examinations in these areas, a discernible gap emerges as there is a lack of rhetorical investigations within the domain of letters to the editor (LTEs). This void prompts the need for a focused inquiry into the rhetorical elements and sequencing employed in LTEs, as this sub-genre represents a unique and influential form of public discourse that warrants scholarly attention (Ehlers & Nelson, 2024). Understanding the rhetorical dimensions of LTEs is essential for a comprehensive grasp of persuasive techniques in written communication and provides an avenue for enriching the existing scholarship in rhetorical studies. In other words, the rhetoric of LTEs as a representative of media discourse has hardly yet been studied and this sub-genre seems overlooked based on the literature review (Fartousi & Al-Smadi, 2024). The study aims to (a) examine the rhetorical elements embedded within letters to the editor (LTEs) and (b) analyze the rhetorical pattern formed by these elements. Gray (2017) highlights the importance of developing a set of clear research questions. Accordingly, this study has created a couple of research questions, aligned with the research objectives to explore and examine the specific rhetorical elements and patterns within LTEs. This design offers insights into how rhetoric enables these letters to effectively transfer meaning, convey public opinion, and persuade their audience. The research questions guiding this study are: What rhetorical elements are embedded in English letters to the editor published in the Toronto Sun newspaper? And What rhetorical pattern is formed by these rhetorical elements?

Literature Review

The Generic Structure Potential (GSP)

The term 'Generic Structure Potential' (GSP) refers to the capacity of language to create varied texts, or genres, through cultural and linguistic resources. It serves as communication goals in a broad range of discourse communities and contexts, entailing the adaptability and flexibility of linguistic structure (Ansary & Babaie, 2016). Obtaining an understanding of GSP can assist individuals to better realize how languages are utilized to generate a wide range of texts, from straightforward narratives to high-level academic papers and professional reports (Naji, 2022).

In essence, the GSP represents the dynamic interworking between language function and form. Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) of Halliday, provides a theoretical framework for analyzing GSP through assessing how linguistic elements realize and structure communication

goals in texts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). A text is constructed by different linguistic strata, such as discourse structure, semantics, and lexicogrammar which interact to generate meaning and convey communicative goals according to the Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory of language and genre (Eggins, 2004).

Previous Studies

To clarify the Generic Structure Potential (GSP) of the 'service Encounter' (p.62), Halliday and Hasan (1998) analyzed a shop transaction text between a customer and shop assistant. They believe that any shop transaction is composed of a set of optional and obligatory macro-structural elements ordered specifically (Muangsamai, 2018). They eventually came out with the following GSP which consists of elements of Greeting (G), Sale Initiation (SI), Sale Enquiry (SE), Sale Request (SR), Sale Compliance (SC), Sale (S), Purchase (P), Purchase Closure (PC), and Finish (F). These elements constructed the following schematic representation: [(G). (SI)^] [(SE.) {SR^SC^} ^S^] P^PC(^F).

Halliday (1990, p. 34) maintains that the GSP model is particularly suitable for any investigatory study that:

'enables us to analyze any passage and relate it to its context in the discourse, and also to the general background of the text: who it is written for, what is its angle on the subject matter and so on.'

Building on this premise, Henry and Rosebery (1997) analyzed forty essays from magazines, newspapers, and encyclopedia with a focus on unravelling the GSP of introductions and endings of selected essays. They also suggested that raising, explaining, and defending a viewpoint is the major communicative purpose of almost all essays. Employing the GSP model of Halliday and Hasan (1989), the researchers have identified three rhetorical elements, pertaining Introducing a Topic (IT), Narrowing the Focus (NF), and stating the Central Idea (CI) of the essays and only the last one is the obligatory elements for it has been found in almost all the selected essays. Besides, they have discovered two more rhetorical elements, including Commitment of Central idea (CC) and Expansion (EX), following the description of obligatory and optional elements by Farooq et al. (2024).

Employing the same model for analysis, Ansary and Babaie (2004) described the rhetorical patterns of English newspaper editorials, as an important public genre. Based on the same model adopted from the Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) theory of language and genre (see Halliday & Hasan, 1990), Ansary and Babaie (2004, p 13-14) identified four obligatory structural elements (Muangsamai, 2018), such as Run-on Headline (RH), Addressing an Issue (AI), Argumentation (A), and Articulating a Position (AP) which existed in 90% of the sampled editorials. In addition, the analysis has revealed a few optional elements which are: providing Background Information (BI), which either preceded AI or followed it, Initiation of Argumentation (IA), and Closure of Argumentation (CA). These elements were sequenced as: RH^(BI)^AI^(IA)^A^(CA)^AP. The elements within the pattern follow a schematic sequence: RH (Run-on Headline) → BI (Background Information) → AI (Addressing an Issue) → IA (Initiating Argumentation) → A (Argumentation) → CA (Closing Argument) → AP (Articulating a Position), which reflect the organizational flow of persuasion in LTEs. The optional elements of the GSP, in some cases, were helpful to writers to start off their arguments, and sometimes used to finely round off the arguments. Aligned with Bonyadi (2010) who studied schematic structures of editorials, this study delved into the GSP of the English editorials written by Americans and Iranians (p.13-14).

To continue with, Fartousi (2012) analyzed an editorial. In his qualitative study, Fartousi (2012) delved into an editorial published in the New Straits Times (NST) the oldest English newspaper in Malaysia, to examine the rhetorical elements embedded in the editorial. The theoretical framework of the analysis was grounded in the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory of language and genre (Halliday & Hasan, 1989). Using the GSP model of Halliday and Hasan (1989), the researcher unearthed eight rhetorical elements, including Run-on Headline (RH), Addressing an Issue (AI), providing Background Information (BI), Initiation of Argumentation (IA), Argumentation (A), Concluding Remarks (CR), Articulating a Position (AP), and Articulating a Solution (AS).

Ashraf (2014), continuing with the press genre, examined letters to the editor (LTEs) publishe in the Pakistani English newspapers, during the years 2002-2009. The study focused on LTEs' genre of English newspapers in the post 9/11 socio-political and historical unrest, employing Bhatia's (2002) framework of Applied Genre theory. The discourse analysis revealed the Pakistani people's dissatisfaction and mistrust in the government which kept distance from its people. The analysis of the LTEs characterized two separated identities: the helpless people and powerless state which neglected its nation's problems.

Again, Kyaw and Zhiying (2019) analyzed the schematic structural elements of editorials in the Myanmar Times newspaper. The analysis was grounded in the GSP proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1989). The findings of the study showcased the presence of two obligatory elements and five optional elements in the editorials, as noted in the GSP analysis of Amusa (2023). The explored obligatory elements were Heading (H) and contributing the writer's Opinion (O), while the optional elements included Picture (P), Caption (C), Addressing the Issue (AI), Background Information (BI), and Discussing the issue raised (D). The sequence of these elements is demonstrated in the following structure: H^ (P)^{*(BI) *(AI) *(D)} ^O.

Furthermore, the research by Osisanwo and Alughin (2019) examined the rhetorical structure, communicative functions, and GSP of American presidential concession speeches. Utilizing Halliday and Hasan's (1989) model of GSP. The research purposefully selected eight American presidential concession speeches, spanning over a period of thirty-three years for analysis. Ten communicative functions were identified in these speeches. Eight elements were identified as obligatory, including Phatic Greeting (PG), General Appreciation (GA), Personal Appreciation (PA), Call to President-elect (CP), Congratulating the President-Elect (CPE), Regrets over Election Outcome (REO), Call for Unity and Support (CUS), and Prayer for America (PAM). The optional elements were Allusion (A) and Eulogizing the Winner (EW). The study concluded that the GSP of American presidential concession speeches is represented as: [PG]^GA.^CP^CPE^{PA}. REO^{(A)} ^{(EW)} ^CUS^[PAM].

Another rhetorical analysis by Mohamad (2022) delved into analyzing appeals and related devices in Englis as a Native Language (ENL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) research abstracts (RAs) from indexed journals. The study revealed significant differences in the rhetorical devices used across ENL and ESL RAs, particularly in appeals to logos, ethos, and pathos. Such findings underscore the influence of linguistic and cultural factors on rhetorical strategies employed in academic discourse.

In another rhetorical study, Naji (2022) delved into a pragma-rhetorical analysis of COVID-19-related headlines from four online newspapers, exploring pragmatic strategies and rhetorical tropes employed in news headlines. The study identified hyperbole as a prevalent rhetorical trope used to provoke reader reactions and reinforce messaging. By examining the pragmatic and rhetorical dimensions of news headlines, the study provided insights into the

persuasive techniques employed by media outlets to engage audiences and shape public perceptions of COVID-19.

After one year, Awoyemi and Ajayi (2023) conducted a qualitative study with a focus on the generic structure analysis of Nigerian presidential inauguration speeches delivered between 1999 and 2015. Utilizing Halliday and Hasan's Generic Structure Potential (GSP) model, the analysis led to the emergence of ten rhetorical elements, including Title (T), Theme (TH), Acknowledgement of God (AoG), Opening Acts (OA), Protocol (P), Recognition of Predecessors (RoP), Manifesto (M), Call for Support (CfS), Closing Acts (CA), and Customary Declaration (CD). Being sequenced together, these rhetorical elements constructed five GSPs, representing the rhetorical structures of the five analyzed presidential inauguration speeches. At the end, the following rhetorical pattern was revealed from all the GSPs: [T. (TH)] ^[(AoG)^OA] ^{P^RoP^} ^{M}^[CfS^CA^CD]. By examining the structural elements of presidential speeches, the study provided insights into the rhetorical strategies employed by political leaders to convey their messages effectively.

The above reviewed studies were all connected to the Hallidayan model of GSP, showcasing how this model is widely applied in varied genres discourse (Tuan, 2022) ranging from newspaper editorials, news headlines, and research abstracts to political speeches. The GSP model in diverse contexts, highlights its significantly robust application as a theoretical framework in the studies of Halliday and Hasan (1989), Henry and Roseberry (1997), Ansary and Babaie (2004), Fartousi (2012), Kyaw and Zhiying (2019, Qsisanwo and Alughin (2019), and Awoyemi and Ajayi (2023). The model is proven as an adaptable theoretical tool. The above-mentioned research studies, have also revealed several rhetorical elements, highlighting the genre's communicative purpose, including Greeting (G), Introducing a Topic (IT), Run-on Headline (RH). Heading (H), and Argumentation (A) which are considered obligatory elements, while some other elements such as Background Information (BI), Picture (P), and Caption (C) are regarded as optional, in line with the rhetorical description of Onipede and Olayinka (2021). Such a pattern of elements is echoed in all the first six reviewed studies within the literature review section.

On the contrary, the reviewed studies varied in their identified rhetorical elements and genre. Henry and Roseberry (1997), for example, laid focus on the elements specifically employed in essays such as Narrowing the Focus (NC) and stating the Central Idea (CI), while Fartousi (2012) has emphasized the structural elements unique to press editorials, including Concluding Remarks (CR) and Addressing an Issue (AI).

Thus, almost all the studies reviewed, demonstrate the versatility of the GSP model in analyzing various genres for exploring the rhetorical structures and elements in newspaper editorials, headlines, speeches, essays, rhetorical appeals, persuasive communication, and communicative functions (HO et al.,2021). As seen in the reviewed studies, the need for researching the rhetorical elements, their sequencing, and pattern is conspicuous and therefore the current research has covered this gap. In other words, the reviewed literature highlights the diverse facets of rhetoric employed in different communicative contexts, ranging from political speeches to newspaper editorials and news headlines. However, limited research has focused specifically on the rhetorical patterns and sequence within LTEs, representing a notable gap in the literature. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the rhetorical pattern employed in LTEs, delving into a) examining the rhetorical pattern of LTEs, b) exploring the elements within such a pattern, and c) analyzing the way these elements are sequenced within LTEs.

Methodology

The present investigation utilizes a qualitative approach to meticulously analyze the media rhetoric in English letters to the editor (LTEs) published in the Toronto Sun newspaper. The choice of a qualitative approach stems from the nature and objectives of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the context of rhetorical analysis, qualitative methods provide the flexibility needed to capture the richness of language and its nuanced expressions (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). The qualitative approach aligns with the interpretive paradigm, emphasizing the subjective and contextual nature of human experiences, which is particularly relevant when studying language use and discourse in a real-world context, as asserted by Johnson and Christensen (2020).

A small-scale corpus for data collection was created, as advised by Khelifi and Bouri (2018). To construct this corpus, the researcher has drawn LTEs from the Toronto Sun newspaper, a widely circulated daily publication in Canada. Ten LTEs published in 2023 have been culled into the corpus. During the selection of these LTEs, the researcher has been faced by the saturation point, resulting in stopping collecting more than ten LTEs. LTEs published in 2023 have been selected rather than old ones since there were plenty of standalone LTEs published in that year. Focusing on a single year allows for coherent analysis of rhetorical elements and patterns within a specific socio-political global event, such as the 2023 Israel-Hamas conflict and Canada's response to it. Unlike other conventional sampling techniques, such as simple random sampling, the present study employed judgmental sampling (Nanjundes & Divakar, 2021). This type of sampling entails a special requirement (Fartousi & Dumanig, 2012a). In other words, the researcher has only selected independent LTEs. Notably, there exist so many LTEs linked to previously published ones which are not suitable for the current study. Therefore, the researcher's judgment plays an essential role in selecting independent or unlinked LTEs. That is the reason why the judgmental method, a subcategory of the non-probability sampling, has been selected (Nanjundes & Divakar, 2021).

A few key factors were involved in choosing the *Toronto Sun* newspaper, which is based in Canada where English is spoken as a native language (Mustafa et al., 2021).Furthermore, LTEs, in most newspapers, respond to previously published LTEs making standalone analysis challenging. The Toronto Sun stands out as one of newspapers publishing a myriad of unlinked LTEs and that's one of the reasons for selecting such a newspaper. This study has only compiled LTEs unlinked to any other LTEs and therefore, the judgmental sampling method has been selected for this study (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). The Toronto Sun is amongst the mainstream English-language newsprint media circulating in Canada, available in both hardcopy and electronic format. Being popular for its opinionated sections and sport reports, the Toronto Sun newspaper has attracted rich audience (Minta, 2024). According to the Toronto Sun's official website (https://torontosun.com), the paper is a daily English language tabloid with a circulation of 180.000 per day. The paper was founded in 1971 (Mustafa et al.,2021).

Following the recommendations of Ansary and Babaie (2004), the researcher, under the guidance of his supervisor, coded all 10 LTEs. After that, the LTEs were provided to a second rater, a specialist in the same field. The aim was to ensure reliability and coding consistency in identifying and labelling rhetorical elements. The identification and definition of rhetorical elements would affect the examination of their sequencing and the rhetorical pattern they form (Fartousi & Al-Smadi, 2024). The comparison of results between the two coders indicated 90% agreement. In other words, nine of the ten LTEs were coded identically. As for discrepancies, only 10 % disagreement between the coders emerged, as the second rater identified a different rhetorical element in one LTE. A 90% agreement rate for the study shows high inter-rater

reliability (Ansary and Babaie, 2004). As a result, the high volume of consistency advocates for the validity of the findings.

Results and Discussion

The analysis led to explore seven rhetorical elements employed within the LTEs. These elements include Run-on Headline (RH), Background Information (BI), Addressing an Issue (AI), Initiating Argumentation (IA), Argumentation (A), Concluding Remarks (CR), and Articulating a Solution (AS). The identified rhetorical elements will be explained below here. Following that, the researcher who has analyzed all the ten LTEs, will randomly select and present an LTE analysis as a sample.

Sampled LTE

In this sub-section, an LTE from the corpus has been randomly chosen, which discusses citizens' reactions towards Canada's stance in the 2023 Israel-Hamas conflict, critiquing Prime Minister Trudeau' policies. The chosen LTE has been broken down into its rhetorical elements and analyzed accordingly. It should be noted that the LTE has been published on 29 October 2023 in the Toronto Sun newspaper.

'WHICH WAY IS THE WIND BLOWING?

AI: Woke culture is alive and well in Canada under Justin Trudeau, our "woke" Prime Minister. **IA:** He's usually the first one out of the gate waving the Canadian flag and condemning anyone with "unacceptable views" (usually meaning they are different from his own) and **BI:** will call people racist, misogynist or generally "un-Canadian" as he did with the Freedom Convoy protesters or any other group he doesn't agree with. He even takes it upon himself to preach to leaders of other countries on "correct thinking." Until last week. He has not been his usual opinionated self, but practically mum on the situation in the Middle East, trying to take the middle road. **A:** He is loath to call Hamas a racist, anti-Semitic terrorist organization because if he did, he'd have to address those Canadians that are in support of Hamas' anti-Semitic views. After the Hamas' terrorist actions of Oct. 7 against Israel, Trudeau stuck his finger in the air to see which way the wind was blowing and where he would lose the most votes. He must feel there are many more anti-Semitic (or uninterested) Canadians around and that he'd lose more votes if he speaks strongly in favour of supporting Israel and condemning Hamas as a terrorist organization. So, he won't. Why else would he be on the other side of the fence of every other democratic country regarding this situation? **CR:** Although other leaders already know he's a fool, they must still be wondering how he arrived at this conclusion. (The Toronto Sun, 29 October 2023) (https://torontosun.com/opinion/letters/letters-to-the-editor-oct-29-2023)'

Run-on Headline (RH)

'WHICH WAY IS THE WIND BLOWING?'

The headline, being a rhetorical question, requires no answer from its audience but a grabbing attention. The question provides a hint to the newspaper readership about a shift and uncertainty in political decision making. The phrase 'wind blowing' is metaphoric in essence, pinpointing Justin Trudeau's inconsistency approach in dealing with Hamas' attack on Israel's territory on October 7th, 2023. The headline urges its readers to question the government's political stance in this respect.

Addressing an Issue (AI)

'Woke culture is alive and well in Canada under Justin Trudeau, our "woke" Prime Minister. '

The LTE commences by addressing the Woke culture, highlighting themes of inclusiveness and collective environment. The author criticizes Justin Trudeau for his inconsistent stance in adhering to the Woke values by using irony, such as ' our Woke Prime Minister'. This element emphasizes the gap between the government's stated principles and its actual policies.

Background Information (BI)

'will call people racist, misogynist or generally "un-Canadian" as he did with the Freedom Convoy protesters or any other group he doesn't agree with. He even takes it upon himself to preach to leaders of other countries on "correct thinking." Until last week. He has not been his usual opinionated self, but practically mum on the situation in the Middle East, trying to take the middle road.'

This element provides a clear context referring to Trudeau's previous attitude and reaction towards protesting groups, highlighting his priority of politics over clear morality.

Initiating argumentation (IA)

'He's usually the first one out of the gate waving the Canadian flag and condemning anyone with "unacceptable views (usually meaning they are different from his own)'

The writer highlights Trudeau's silence in condemning Hamas as a terrorist group, referencing his controversial speech for other leaders about 'correct' thinking. This element sets the stage for a serious argumentation.

Argumentation (A)

'He is loath to call Hamas a racist, anti-Semitic terrorist organization because if he did, he'd have to address those Canadians that are in support of Hamas' anti-Semitic views. After the Hamas' terrorist actions of Oct. 7 against Israel, Trudeau stuck his finger in the air to see which way the wind was blowing and where he would lose the most votes. He must feel there are many more anti-Semitic (or uninterested) Canadians around and that he'd lose more votes if he speaks strongly in favor of supporting Israel and condemning Hamas as a terrorist organization. So, he won't. Why else would he be on the other side of the fence of every other democratic country regarding this situation?'

This rhetorical component criticizes Justin Trudeau's political position by avoiding calling Hamas a terrorist organization, risking losing votes. It accuses him of prioritizing neutrality over moral acts for appeasing his Islamist supporters as a part of population.

Concluding Remarks (CR)

'Although other leaders already know he's a fool, they must still be wondering how he arrived at this conclusion.'

The element concludes the letter by reiterating Trudeau's foolish political stance in the eyes of other world leaders, underscoring skepticism in the lack of principled actions. This is the last element used in this LTE, that is, the writer avoids employing any solutions.

The examined sampled LTE exhibits that it holds six rhetorical elements that can be cataloged as: RH^AI^IA^BI^A^CR. In the scheme, carets (^) show sequencing. The position of BI between IA and A uncommon, as it usually appears before IA and adjacent to AI in almost all the analyzed LTEs in the corpus. Moreover, the writer suffices to end up the LTE with CR without suggesting any solution in the end.

Analysis

The researcher analyzed all ten LTEs. As a result, seven key rhetorical elements have been revealed. The analysis revealed that a few elements have appeared in all the analyzed LTEs, while others have emerged in some of the analyzed LTEs. Thus, the following figure illustrates the results of the analysis, focusing on the presence of the rhetorical elements identified in the analyzed corpus.
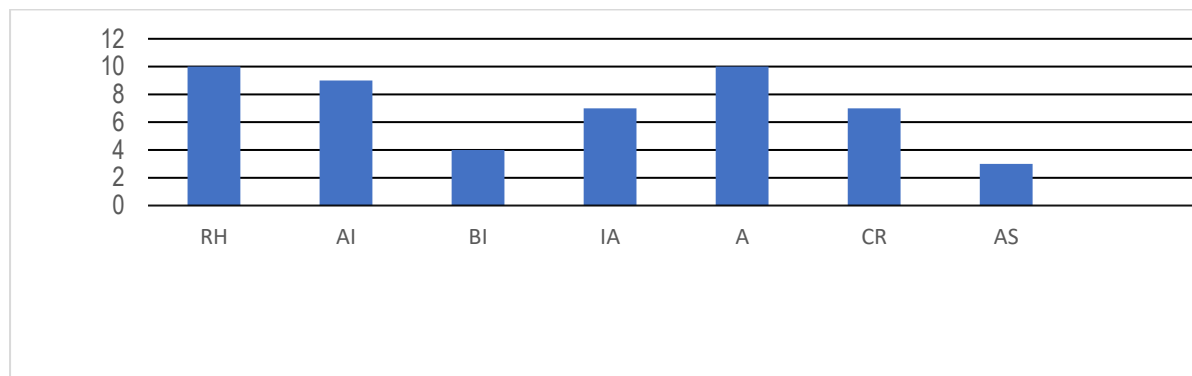
Figure 1. Frequency Distribution of All Rhetorical Elements

As seen in the above figure, elements RH and A have emerged in the whole corpus. Element AI has been observed in nine examined LTEs. Therefore, these three rhetorical elements with ninety and hundred percent presence are considered obligatory, based on Ansary and Babaie's (2016) explanation of obligatory and optional elements. On the contrary, other elements, such as BI, IA, CR, and AS, in order, with forty, seventy, seventy, and thirty percent frequencies in the corpus are regarded as optional (See table one). The attendance of these elements in LTEs is deemed unnecessary yet important (Fartousi & Dumanig, 2012e). Additionally, the table provided below gives a broader view of the frequency, percentage, and features of obligation and optionality for the rhetorical elements examined in the LTEs.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Identified Rhetorical Elements

Rhetorical Element	Frequency	Percentage	Obligatory	Optional
Run-on Headline (RH)	10	100%	✓	
Addressing an Issue (AI)	9	90%	✓	
Background Information (BI)	4	40%		✓
Initiating Argumentation (IA)	7	70%		✓
Argumentation (A)	10	100%	✓	
Concluding Remarks (CR)	7	70%		✓

Rhetorical Element	Frequency	Percentage	Obligatory	Optional
Articulating a Solution (AS)	3	30%		✓

As mentioned in Methodology section, the corpus of the study contains ten LTEs drawn electronically from the website of the Toronto Sun newspaper (https://torontosun.com). The title, link, and GSP of each LTE in the corpus have been saved. Table 2 best demonstrates such metadata of the corpus. The compilation and analysis of all ten GSPs have led to the emergence of a rhetorical pattern, which will be illustrated later in this section.

Table 2. Distribution of Identified GSPs Across Analyzed LTEs

Title	GSP	Link
ALL SHOULD QUALIFY	RH^AI^(IA)^A^(AS)^(CR)	https://torontosun.com/opinion /letters/letters-to-the-editor-oct-8-2023
VALUE OF IMMIGRATION	RH^AI^(IA)^A^(CR)	https://torontosun.com/opinion /letters/letters-to-the-editor-oct-25-2023
MORE THAN ONE	RH^AI^(IA)^A^(AS)	https://torontosun.com/opinion letters/letters-to-the-editor-oct-26-2023
Woefully uniformed	RH^AI^(IA)^A	https://torontosun.com/opinion /letters/letters-to-the-editor-oct-27-2023
WHICH WAY IS THE WIND BLOWING?	RH^AI^(IA)^(BI)^A^(CR)	https://torontosun.com/opinion /letters/letters-to-the-editor-oct-29-2023
Shame on You	RH^(BI)^AI^(IA)^A^(CR)	https://torontosun.com/opinion/letters/letters-to-the-editor-oct-31-2023
SCIENCE FICTION	RH^AI^A^(CR)	https://torontosun.com/opinion/letters/letters-to-the-editor-nov-2-2023
WAR ZONE	RH^(BI)^AI^A^(CR)	https://torontosun.com/opinion/letters/letters-to-the-editor-nov-4-2023

Title	GSP	Link
TAXED TO THE MAX	RH^(BI)^AI^A^(AS)	https://torontosun.com/opinion/letters/letters-to-the-editor-nov-19-2023
FORGOTTEN WAR	RH^AI^(IA)^A^(CR)	https://torontosun.com/opinion/letters/letters-to-the-editor-nov-20-2023

The above identified GSPs demonstrate the rhetorical elements and sequencing they possess. The GSPs shown above indicate which rhetorical elements they contain and how they are ordered in relation to one another. The analysis of the ten GSPs helped to uncover a rhetorical pattern, which incorporates all the rhetorical elements and sequencing patterns observed in the study. The rhetorical pattern of the LTEs published in the Toronto Sun is now schematized as RH^ [(BI). AI] ^[(IA)^A] ^ [(AS). (CR)]. The caret symbol (^) shows the sequence between rhetorical elements, while round brackets signify their optionality (Fartousi & Dumanig, 2012d). For example, the element BI, which is enclosed in parentheses, is considered optional. A dot between rhetorical elements denotes sequence interchangeability. For instance, in the collocation, '[(BI).AI]', element (BI) can precede or follow AI. The elements within the square brackets form a collocation, meaning they almost always appear side by side. In the scheme above, element BI is positioned flexibly. It might follow RH or precede element A which does not usually occur (Fartousi & Dumanig, 2012c). In this case, the writer brings in contextual information exactly before arguing the discussed issue to better convince the reader, using credibility and trust. Thus, the following figure portrays a clear picture of the revealed rhetorical pattern.

RH^ [(BI). AI] ^[(IA)^A] ^ [(AS). (CR)]

Figure 2. Common Rhetorical Pattern Across Analyzed LTEs

In the above pattern, dots refer to exchangeability; round brackets indicate optionality; and square brackets show collocation. Based on the analysis, only element (BI) can have three different positions: next to AI, before A, or after A. The other elements can only move within the square brackets (Fartousi & Dumanig, 2012b).

Discussion

The current study, employing the Generic Structure Potential (GSP) model, has explored and analyzed seven essential rhetorical elements within letters to the editor (LTEs) published in the Toronto Sun newspaper: RH, AI, (BI), (IA), A, (CR), and (AS). The elements enclosed in round brackets are considered optional because they appeared in less than 90 percent of the analyzed LTEs, while the others are obligatory. These elements have been further detailed in the results section. The analyzed LTEs from the Toronto Sun have utilized these sequenced elements to engage public opinion and persuade readers (Fartousi & Al-Smadi, 2024).

The findings of the present study, concerning rhetorical elements support the previous studies, which relies on the GSP model for analyzing diverse media discourse, such as editorials,

speeches, and abstracts. The findings are consistent with the research by Awoyemi and Ajayi (2023), Osisanwo and Alughin (2019), Kyaw and Zhiying (2019), Fartousi (2012), and Ansary and Babaie (2004), all of whom adopted the GSP model of Halliday and Hasan (1989). These studies collectively have explored and analyzed a set of obligatory and optional rhetorical elements organized sequentially (Muangsamai, 2018). These structural elements contribute to the persuasive goal of communication, as argued by Hayek et al. (2020). This demonstrates the GSP model's applicability as a theoretical framework for analyzing various genres (Halliday, 1990).

As previously stated, this study has explored and analyzed several rhetorical elements, sequenced in relation to one another to create rhetorical structures or GSPs. This exploration is like those by Osisanwo and Alughin (2019) and Awoyemi and Ajayi (2023), who also explored and analyzed a range of rhetorical elements arranged specifically to create GSPs, as shown in the reviewed literature. These two research studies, however, differ significantly from the current one as they have investigated presidential speeches as a distinct form of discourse and identified different rhetorical elements from those found here, including General Appreciation (GA), Call to President-elect (CP), Protocol (P), Recognition of Predecessors (RoP), etcetera. Moreover, presidential speeches are written by politicians, whereas LTEs are crafted by ordinary citizens, highlighting a fundamental difference in their intended audiences. LTEs, known as citizen-driven communications, express the writer's opinion on public issues (Minta, 2024), unlike presidential speeches, which represent official political discourse.

Unlike Ashraf (2014), which analyzed socio-political perspectives by adopting Applied Genre Theory, the present study employs the GSP model, focusing on rhetorical structures rather than ideological framing. In other words, the core of the current study lies in the features of rhetorical elements and structures within LTEs, which contrasts with the socio-political context of Ashraf's (2014) research. Both studies have examined different features of LTEs in different cultural contexts. Ashraf (2014) in her investigation employed Bhatia's (2002) framework of Applied Genre theory, unlike the current study, which adopts the GSP model of Halliday and Hasan (1989). Consequently, the only commonality between these two studies is their use of LTEs as a press sub-genre, allowing for a deeper understanding of how rhetorical and contextual factors influence the form and function of LTEs to express citizen concerns, such as the Pakistani and Canadian people's dissatisfaction and mistrust in their respective governments.

Furthermore, the main objective of the current study is to explore and analyze rhetorical elements and structures that contribute to audience persuasion. This communicative objective is aligned with the aims identified in Mohamad's (2022) and Naji's (2022) research studies. These studies focused on the rhetorical appeals found in other public discourse to explore how these appeals lead to persuasion. These two studies share a focus on persuasion with the current investigation, demonstrating that both rhetorical elements and rhetorical appeals are used to persuade the audience, which is the essence of rhetoric (Myllylä, 2019).

Finally, Tiantian (2023), who examined English abstracts authored by English and Chinese scholars, delved into micro-level linguistic features, such as references, ellipsis, substitution, etcetera. In contrast, this investigation adopted a macro-level approach, employing the GSP model of Halliday and Hasan (1989) to explore and analyze the rhetorical elements and structures of LTEs. Furthermore, Tiantian (2023) investigated the cohesion between sentences to show how sentences are sequenced in abstracts, while the current study investigates the cohesion and sequence between rhetorical elements, contributing to the overall persuasive functions of LTEs (Minta, 2024). Both studies utilized two distinct models by Halliday and Hasan, serving as theoretical frameworks for analyzing abstracts and LTEs as different genres.

The study's analysis has revealed several rhetorical elements, including Run-on Headline (RH), Addressing an issue (AI), Background Information (BI), Initiating Argumentation (IA), Argumentation (A), Concluding Remarks (CR), and Articulating a Solution (AS). Hence, these elements are the most appropriate response to the first research question of the study, concerning the rhetorical elements utilized within the Toronto Sun LTEs.

In conclusion, the entire discussion exhibits how citizen-crafted communicative texts, such as LTEs, uniquely engage, contextualize, argue, and conclude. The uncovered rhetorical pattern underscores how citizens attempt to inquire, suggest solutions, and convince their fellow citizens (Struever, 2023) through the flexibly strategic organization of rhetorical elements, employing the GSP model of Halliday and Hasan (1989), which has proven the model's relevance for analyzing media communication (Halliday, 1990). Therefore, based on the analysis of sequencing and rhetorical pattern, the most appropriate response to the second question of the present study, concerning the overall pattern created by such an arrangement, is schematized in the following scheme: RH^ [(BI). AI] ^[(IA)^A] ^ [(AS). (CR)].

Conclusion

The analysis of rhetorical elements of letters to the editor (LTEs) published in the Toronto Sun paper, exhibits that such letters are considered key communicative discourse which are both rhetorical and functional (Struever, 2023). Each of these rhetorical elements, entailing headline, argumentation, and so forth defines a unique segment within LTEs (Mémet, 2025). The proficiency of communication within LTEs is intricately linked to the skilled use of rhetorical elements, such as Run-on Headline (RH), Background Information (BI), Addressing an Issue (AI), Initiating Argumentation (IA), Argumentation (A), Concluding Remarks (CR), and Articulating a Solution (AS).

The examination of rhetorical elements and their patterns enhance the understanding of LTEs as a media sub-genre, leading to the identification of rhetorical features in LTEs which helps media professionals gain a deeper understanding of how these letters are rhetorically constructed. This improved understanding can help journalists and editors in better analyzing and responding to reader feedback. This might lead to an improvement in the quality and significance of their publications after they gain a deeper understanding of the rhetorical landscape of Canadian media with the unique characteristics of LTEs in the Toronto Sun newspaper, as Alexandrovna et al. (2023) emphasized in their media discourse studies.

A better understanding of the sequencing of rhetorical elements within LTEs can contribute to the communication strategies of the media industry (Skogerbø et al. 2021). Examining effective sequences and patterns can assist media outlets to address their concerns and tailor their editorial procedures to engage with their audience. This enhanced insight can aid them in maintaining efficient communication and in engaging the community (Rangsarittikun, 2025).

It is important to note that since this research concentrates on the rhetorical elements, their sequence, and the rhetorical pattern of LTEs, it is highly recommended that other scholars lay focus on other sub-genres, such as news reports and editorials. The way writers develop and organize such press sub-genres can aid readers in better comprehend their structure and better determine the main purpose of such communicative texts. Additionally, other scholars can highlight other aspects of these subgenres as well as LTEs, including rhetorical devices and strategies.

The present study can serve as a foundation for further research to evaluate and compare rhetorical patterns and elements across various newspapers and media platforms to explore similarities and differences in LTE construction. Such a comparative analytic approach could

add valuable insight into the role of rhetorical strategies in shaping public discourse across different media contexts (Ansary & Babaie, 2004).

During the analysis procedure, the researcher has encountered a few challenges, confining the overall investigation. The first restriction relates to the study's scope, as its focus is on LTEs published in the Toronto Sun newspaper during the year 2023. Other studies can expand the timeframe and include LTEs from multiple years. This limited focus may restrict the generalizability of the study's results to other newspapers or media platforms. These newspapers and media organizations might have distinct socio-political contexts, cultural practices, editorial policies, and reader demographics, which could cause a variation from the rhetorical pattern observed in this study (Ansary & Babaie, 2004). Language restriction is another challenge faced by this study. It was carried out on English-written LTEs, potentially overlooking LTEs written and published in languages other than English. Such a language constraint might result in a limited representation of rhetorical patterns and elements, especially in multicultural and multilingual contexts. The LTE writers of such language communities might express societal concerns and present their arguments differently, as Fartousi & Al-Smadi (2024) posited in their book. The third challenge encountered in the study refers to the sample size limitation. Although the researcher made every effort to ensure a diverse and representative sample, the study's findings may not fully represent the broad spectrum of rhetorical elements, sequencing, and patterns prevalent in LTEs, due to the availability and accessibility of data (Ansary & Babaie, 2016).

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