

Identifying Language Learning Strategies for Reading among Malaysian TESL Postgraduates in a Public University

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Abstract

One of the most vital skills needed by postgraduate students to excel in their tertiary education is the ability to read effectively. Reading skill is viewed as a necessity for postgraduate students as they are needed to effectively indulge in in-depth academic reading to pursue their research topics. Thus, this study was aimed to identify the language learning strategies employed by TESL postgraduates, especially in curating and enhancing their reading skills. 50 postgraduates from a public university in Malaysia were chosen to participate in the study via convenience sampling. This study employed a quantitative approach with a survey research design whereby the data collection was done by employing an online questionnaire which was adapted from the (Young Learner's Language Strategy Use Survey, 2002; Language Strategy Use Survey, 2005). The adapted online questionnaire consisted of 24 items on a 4-point scale. The data obtained from the online questionnaire was analysed quantitatively using descriptive analysis focussing on frequency, percentage and mean using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The findings revealed that Malaysian TESL postgraduates' tend to employ all of the language learning strategies in order to enhance their reading skills. Additionally, the study also found that the most employed language learning strategies were memory strategies with a mean value of 3.64 while the least employed language learning strategies were social strategies with a mean value of 2.85. These findings provide useful information for stakeholders to use as a basis to employ necessary steps to improve the reading skills among postgraduate students in Malaysia.

Keywords: Language Learning Strategies, Reading Skills, Malaysian TESL Postgraduates, Young Learner's Language Strategy Use Survey, Language Strategy Use Survey

Introduction

Reading is a cognitive process that plays a huge role in developing a person's intellectual. Rohaizat and Aziz (2021) pointed out that reading helps to assist the learners in their development of cognitive skills and enhances their level of comprehension on the different discipline they undertake. Adding on that that, effective readers are found to have a better chance at augmenting their mental horizons to achieve more success especially in the current century where individuals are entitled to possess a higher level of reading literacy to match with the current rapid development of the world (Baba & Affendi, 2020). Conforming to this, as cited in Abramson (2004) as well as Scott and Saaiman (2016), being a good reader isn't a luxury anymore as reading is deemed as a necessary life skill needed to survive in the 21st century. Hence, many emergent researchers are putting their main focus on researching the importance of reading skills for learners as reading is viewed as a pivotal role in curating successfulness in an academic context.

As reading is viewed as an important skill in all aspects of formal education, it is undeniably the same with tertiary education among postgraduate students but with a higher note of importance as postgraduate students are entitled to go through an ample of active in-depth academic reading in order to complete their studies. According to Rhead and Little (2020), postgraduate students are needed to engage in a variety of reading tasks to ensure that they have a profound knowledge to complete the study on the subject area that they are dwelling on. The postgraduate students are expected to select reading materials that are relevant to their study before moving on to read the selected materials, digest, evaluate and pinpoint the information needed to explore their research topics. In line with the notion above, Wallace and Wray (2021) posited that reading skills are recognised as one of the main pillars in postgraduate studies. Khalil (2019) whereas claimed that reading is an important skills for postgraduate students as it guides them to pin point important information needed and to come up with logical arguments related to their studies.

Even though reading is viewed as an important skill in postgraduate studies, it was found that these students were still lacking of this particular skill. Based on a review done by Suhaimi et al (2019), it is noticed that number of Malaysian postgraduate students that does not manage to graduate on time drastically increases every year. Hoon et al (2019) pointed out that one of the reasons for the shortcoming is the postgraduate students' moderate readiness towards critical reading skills. Adding on to this, Sidhu et al (2016) as cited in Shamida et al (2021) whereas found that ample of postgraduate students' had limited reading skills as they find it difficult to analyse and evaluate the materials read by them. Not only that, Seng and Zainal (2017) whilst observed that postgraduate students often neglected the importance of reading skills that is needed in order to meet the demands of academic reading while undertaking their studies.

Albeit the raising concerns on postgraduate students' reading skills, there aren't ample of studies that have explored the use of language learning strategies employed by postgraduate students especially in enhancing their reading skills. Rubin (1975) brought forward the notion that language learning strategies should be termed as "the learner's strategies" or "the strategies employed by the learners" in order to become successful learners. According to Zakaria et al (2019), the use of language learning strategies will generally present a positive correlation between the strategies used and the learners'

performance that directly helps them to be better at reading. Adding on, Ang et al (2017) put forward that the employment of a good strategy will ease and help learners to expedite language skills attainment. But in spite of that, the language learning strategies that are chosen and employed by postgraduate students are not extensively researched. Therefore, more research should be done to provide an understanding on how extensive is the use of language learning strategies employed by these postgraduate students in order to hone their reading skills to complete their tertiary education.

It is undeniable that reading process is never an easy one, especially in the context of tertiary education. Bearing that in mind, completing tertiary education in the context of Malaysian education where English is learned and taught as a second language (ESL) unquestionably isn't complete without developing reading skills especially. With that being said, this study will be addressing the language learning strategies employed by TESL postgraduates in improving their reading skills for acquiring ESL in pursuing their tertiary education in a public university. In view of this, it is essential to identify the language learning strategies employed by TESL postgraduates in enhancing their reading skills so that the stakeholders can gain an insight on the choices made by these students in order to further improve their reading literacy. The insights gained can later on be used as a basis for stakeholders to take necessary steps to improve the reading skills among postgraduate students in Malaysia. In conjunction with this, this study will address the following research question:

1. What are the language learning strategies employed by TESL postgraduate students in order to improve their reading skills?

Literature Review

Reading Skills among Adult Learners

Reading is a process in which readers comprehend and interact with the ideas expressed in written texts. It is a complex process which encompasses many different components such as word decoding, word reading, spelling, fluency, and comprehension. In early stages of literacy building, learners develop reading-related skills which include phonological awareness, rapid naming, and oral reading (Schatschneider et al., 2002). In later stages, emphasis was shifted to fluency and goal-directed behaviours such as comprehension and new learning (Cirino et al., 2018; Ahmed et al., 2016).

In tertiary education, adult learners need advanced reading skills beyond mere skimming and scanning. Studies have portrayed the importance of critical reading skills in tertiary education (Khonamri et al., 2020). Adult learners with critical reading skills can develop mental models that represent the content of the reading materials and extend beyond the information presented "by asking questions, making hypotheses, seeking evidence, and validating assumptions" (Langer, 1990, p. 815). Such skills are essential for postgraduate learners as they constantly read through past literature, distinguish facts from opinions, explore new dimensions and draw their own conclusions (Rahman, 2018). According to Harvey and Goudvis (2017), critical reading is "thinking while understanding". Thus, they proposed a four-step framework that helped learners develop strategies for critical reading: (i) activating and connecting learners' prior knowledge with the reading materials; (ii) questioning the text before, during, and after reading the materials; (iii) visualising and inferring the content of the reading materials; and (iv) summarising and synthesising information to build new ideas. Once

learners completely understand the reading materials, they are able to critical analyse the texts and develop new meanings (Marschall & Davis, 2012).

Language Learning Strategies

Language learning is a complex process that requires learners to cram in information, internalise new knowledge, and apply the language in various situations. Especially in second language learning, learners need to adopt or adapt certain actions or strategies to achieve the goals of language learning. Therefore, studies that investigated various language learning strategies were implemented. With the developments in cognitive psychology since the 1960s, research on language learning strategies has since shown significant growth (Williams & Burden, 1997).

Various researchers have provided different definitions of language learning strategies over the years. Language learning strategies were defined as the behaviours or steps from behavioural, cognitive, and affective aspects, in which language learners apply in their process of language learning (Chamot, 1987; Rubin, 1987). Meanwhile, Oxford (1989, p. 235) instilled the element of self-regulation and self-directedness by defining learning strategies as “behaviours or actions which learners use to make language learning more successful, self-directed and enjoyable”. In the following year, Oxford refined her definition of language learning strategies as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning, easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed and more transferable to new situations” (1990, p. 8). Hence, it can be concluded that language learning strategies are thoughts and actions consciously used by learners to regulate themselves in multiple aspects in order to accomplish language tasks (Oxford, 2017).

Even though different scholars have contributed to the categorisation of language learning strategies, most of them follow a similar pattern of categorisation with minimal changes. In this section, the taxonomy of language learning strategies proposed by Oxford (1990) will be discussed. Oxford divided language learning strategies into two main categories, direct and indirect strategies, which further deviates into six groups (see Table 1). Direct strategies involve the use of language; indirect strategies do not involve the use of language, but they support language learning (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990). Memory strategies refer to the strategies for remembering and retrieving new information. Cognitive strategies are mental strategies used to make sense of their learning. Meanwhile, compensation strategies are used when learners face knowledge gap so that they can continue learning the language despite the lack of knowledge. On the other hand, metacognitive strategies are the strategies to regulate and coordinate learners’ learning process. Affective strategies are strategies that learners use to regulate their emotional well-being in learning, and the social strategies concern learning with and from others.

Table 1

Oxford's classification of language learning strategies

Direct Strategies	Memory Strategies	Creating mental linkages
		Applying images and sounds
		Reviewing well
	Cognitive Strategies	Employing action
		Practising
		Receiving and sending messages
		Analysing and reasoning
		Creating structure for input or output
		Compensation strategies
Indirect Strategies	Metacognitive Strategies	Overcoming limitations in speaking and writing
		Centring your learning
		Arranging and planning your learning
	Affective Strategies	Evaluating your learning
		Lowering your anxiety
		Encouraging yourself
	Social Strategies	Taking your emotional temperature
		Asking questions
		Cooperating with others
		Empathising with others

A body of past studies have been conducted to investigate the language learning strategies used by adult learners, postgraduate learners in our context, in their language learning. Nhem (2019) found out that Cambodian adolescent learners used cognitive, metacognitive and social strategies in learning English. Chanderan and Hashim (2022) investigated the preferred language learning strategies by ESL undergraduate learners, and the results showed the use of all six strategies with different frequencies. The most preferred strategy is metacognitive strategy followed by social strategy, while the least preferred strategy is affective strategy. Another study by Hashim et al (2018) that targeted TESL adult learners revealed that most participants preferred using cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies most frequently in their learning. A study by Bria and Mbato (2019) compared the use of metacognitive strategies in reading between undergraduate and postgraduate learners. The findings showed that postgraduate learners used more metacognitive strategies in reading, and they showed higher maturity in reading. Even though numerous studies on language learning strategies have been conducted in the context postgraduate learning, there were limited studies that focused on the types of strategies used for reading skills. As mentioned previously, critical reading is crucial in postgraduate studies, and can be developed when learners used suitable strategies in their reading. Therefore, this study drives to gain insights on the language learning strategies employed by Malaysian TESL postgraduates in a public university, specifically with regards to reading skills.

Methodology*Research Design*

The study employed a quantitative design using a survey research design whereby the data collection is carried out by employing a survey. Surveys are commonly used by researchers to gain a greater understanding about individual or group perspectives relative to a particular concept or topic of interest (Jones et al., 2013). Therefore, the researchers made use of the survey research design in the study as it the most appropriate method of collecting data to answer the research question outlined in the study.

Research Participants

This study adopted a nonprobability sampling method namely convenience sampling. According to (Stratton, 2021), convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method where the researcher selects sample members from only available and easily accessible participants. In conjunction with this, the researchers in this study made use of the convenient sampling technique to involve 50 TESL postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university that was easily accessible to them.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to answer the research question outlined in the study, an online questionnaire was administered to the participants. The online questionnaire was adapted from the Young Learner's Language Strategy Use Survey (Cohen & Oxford, 2002) and Language Strategy Use Survey (Cohen et al., 2005). The researchers adapted the items in the online questionnaire from both surveys mentioned above to avoid misinterpretation of items listed in the questionnaire. This is because the Young Learner's Language Use Survey presents straightforward items that are also applicable to adult learners which are direct and can easily be understood by the participants. Hence, the researchers selected items from both surveys to adapt an online questionnaire but focusing mainly on the strategies listed for reading skills in order to address the research question promptly.

The online questionnaire consisted of four parts namely respondents' profile, Part A, Part B and Part C. The first part which is the participants' profile is meant to collect respondents' demographic background. Part A, Part B and Part C was meant to collect data on respondents' use of language learning strategies which was divided according to three sections focusing on reading strategies that are used by respondents to improve their reading skills following the order of three main themes that are namely "What do I do to read more?", "What I do to understand what I read?" and "What I do when I don't understand what I read?". All three sections contained a mixture of items depicting language learning strategies from both direct and indirect strategies focusing mainly on strategies used for reading which totalled up to 24 items. The items that were obtained from the direct and indirect strategies were plainly mixed and matched under the three themes mentioned above in order to avoid the respondents' biasness towards the items while answering the online questionnaire. Adding on, these three parts adopted the four point Likert Scale to highlight how the participants responded to the items given by choosing from 1: I use this strategy and I like it, 2: I have tried this strategy and would use it again, 3: I've never used this strategy but am interested in it, 4: This strategy doesn't fit me.

Data collected from the online questionnaire was analysed quantitatively using descriptive analysis focussing on frequency, percentage and mean. The descriptive analysis of the data collected was analysed and tabulated using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software.

Findings and Discussion

Table 2 depicted the findings of this study which consisted of the distribution, frequency and mean on reading strategies use for language learning among Malaysian TESL postgraduates in a public university.

Table 2

Frequency, percentage and mean of reading strategies used for language learning

No.	Strategies	I use this strategy and like it.	I have tried this strategy and would use it again.	I have never used this strategy but am interested in it.	This strategy doesn't fit me.	Mean
Section 1: Memory Strategies						
1	I read things more than once.	32 (64%)	15 (30%)	3 (6%)	0	3.58
2	I look at the pictures and what is under the pictures.	34 (68%)	13 (26%)	3 (6%)	0	3.62
3	I look at the headings.	40 (80%)	7 (14%)	2 (4%)	1 (2%)	3.72
Section 2: Cognitive Strategies						
4	I read a lot in the language.	33 (66%)	15 (30%)	0	2 (4%)	3.58
5	I skim over a reading text to get the main idea.	39 (78%)	11 (22%)	0	0	3.78
6	I look for important facts.	39 (78%)	10 (20%)	1 (2%)	0	3.76
7	I stop to think about what I just read.	28 (56%)	12 (24%)	6 (12%)	4 (8%)	3.28
8	I underline parts that seem important.	34 (68%)	13 (26%)	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	3.58
9	I mark the readings in different colours to help me understand.	28 (56%)	16 (32%)	3 (6%)	3 (6%)	3.38
10	I skim an academic text first to get the main idea and then go back and read it more carefully.	37 (54%)	12 (24%)	1 (2%)	0	3.72

11	I read a story or dialogue several times until I understand it.	27 (54%)	18 (36%)	3 (6%)	2 (4%)	3.40
Section 3: Compensation Strategies						
12	I use a dictionary to find the meaning.	25 (50%)	21 (42%)	1 (2%)	3 (6%)	3.36
13	I use my L1 to understand the text.	21 (42%)	18 (36%)	4 (8%)	7 (14%)	3.06
14	I guess the approximate meaning by using clues from the context of the reading material.	37 (74%)	12 (24%)	1 (2%)	0	3.72
Section 4: Metacognitive Strategies						
15	I check to see how much I understood.	31 (62%)	16 (32%)	3 (6%)	0	3.56
16	I think about what will come next in the reading.	33 (66%)	13 (26%)	3 (6%)	1 (2%)	3.56
17	I plan out in advance how I'm going to read the text, monitor to see how I'm doing and then check to see how much I understand.	20 (40%)	13 (26%)	13 (26%)	4 (8%)	2.98
18	I pay attention to the organisation of the text, especially headings and subheadings.	28 (56%)	17 (34%)	5 (10%)	0	3.46
Section 5: Affective Strategies						
19	I read for fun in the language.	35 (70%)	15 (30%)	0	0	3.70
20	I find things to read that interests me.	41 (82%)	9 (18%)	0	0	3.82
21	I look for things to read that are not too hard.	22 (44%)	21 (42%)	2 (4%)	5 (10%)	3.20
22	I play soft music while reading.	14 (28%)	9 (18%)	14 (28%)	13 (26%)	2.48
Section 6: Social Strategies						
23	I ask for help from my friends.	14 (28%)	22 (44%)	8 (16%)	6 (12%)	2.88
24	I try to learn the culture of the context of the reading material.	22 (44%)	17 (34%)	10 (20%)	1 (2%)	3.20

25	I discuss my feelings about what I read with my peers.	21 (42%)	7 (14%)	6 (12%)	6 (12%)	2.46
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Based on Table 2, Section 1 consisted of three items which attempted to investigate Malaysian TESL postgraduates' memory-related reading strategies for ESL learning. There were 80% of them who were keen to look at the headings while reading a text. There were about three fifths of them who read a text for more than one time and observed at the illustrations with their captions.

There were eight items in Section 2 which examined the respondents' cognitive-related reading strategies for learning ESL. The strategy which was applied by most Malaysian TESL postgraduates was skimming over a reading text to get the main idea. The findings showed that 80% of postgraduates tend to skim, most probably due to the required reading amount as a TESL postgraduate. This statement is supported by Rayner et al (2016) who asserted that readers often skim when they have an enormous amount of reading materials to be digested in limited time. The 10th statement has also proven that all respondents who either fond of skimming an academic text first to get the main idea and then reading it again meticulously, or they are interested to use it in future. Moreover, it is evident that Malaysian TESL postgraduates will apply the reading strategies of looking for important facts and making some notes on it. Specifically, there are a total of 78%, 68% and 56% of respondents who look for key facts in the reading text, underline and mark them in different colours respectively to enhance their reading, while there was a range of 20% to 32% of them would like to apply these reading strategies again. Meanwhile, the findings also showed that the respondents tend to read a lot in the target language (66%) and they read it repetitively until they have fully comprehended the reading text (56%), despite that 4% of them find themselves do not fit these cognitive-related reading strategies. Among the cognitive-related reading strategies, the strategy with least mean score (3.28) is stop to think about what I just read, which corresponds to their tendency to skim a reading text to get the gist of the text (Sabudin et al., 2022).

In terms of the compensation reading strategies, it is noticed that the respondents were less likely to rely their mother tongue or a dictionary to understand a reading text, with a mean score of 3.06 and 3.36 respectively. In contrast, they tend to identify the meaning of unknown words via contextual clues in the reading text, where all of the respondents liked this strategy (74%), wished to use it again (24%) or they are interested to it although they never tried this strategy before (2%).

Items 15 to 18 were aimed to identify whether Malaysian TESL postgraduates applied metacognitive strategies in reading for language learning. The findings exhibited that the respondents preferred to check their understanding of the reading text and think about what comes next in the upcoming part of the reading text, with the highest mean score of 3.56. Also, 56% of the respondents tended to pay attention to the reading text's organisation such as headings and subheadings and the rest of them are interested to use it in future. Nonetheless, it was noticed that there were lesser number of respondents who planned their reading strategy and monitored their reading progress and understanding as well, with a mean score of 2.98.

Section 5 consisted of four items which were related to their affective reading strategies. Interestingly, the findings found that most Malaysian TESL postgraduates were keen to apply extensive reading strategies, were they favoured reading a reading text in target language which attracted their interests to read it for fun, with a mean score of 3.82 and 3.70 respectively. There were 44% of the respondents who preferred reading an easy text, and 10% of them thought the otherwise. The lowest mean score ($\mu = 2.48$) is denoted by the strategy of listening to soft music while reading. It was probably because the respondents might perceive that it might distract their concentration while reading as claimed by (Kumar et al., 2016).

The sixth section in the questionnaire is about the social strategies used for reading among Malaysian TESL postgraduates. The range of mean score for this section is 2.46 to 3.20, which is comparatively lower than other sections. The strategy "I try to learn the culture of the context of the reading material" denoted the highest mean score ($\mu = 3.20$) with 22 respondents (44%) liked it, 17 respondents (34%) would use it again and 10 of them (20%) were interested in it. However, the respondents were less likely to rely on their peers for help-seeking and expressing feelings, with a mean score of 2.88 and 2.46 respectively.

The average mean scores for each type of strategy had been calculated and then interpreted and ranked with the reference of level of interpretation in Table Z suggested by (Best and Kahn, 2006). The findings on the comparison of means between different reading strategies for language learning were presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Comparison of means between different reading strategies for language learning

Rank	Strategy	Average Mean Score	Interpretation
1	Memory Strategies	3.64	High
2	Cognitive Strategies	3.56	High
3	Metacognitive Strategies	3.39	High
4	Compensation Strategies	3.38	High
5	Affective Strategies	3.30	High
6	Social Strategies	2.85	Moderate

Table 4

Indicator of Mean Scores Interpretation

Mean Scores	Level of Interpretation
1.00-1.75	Very Low
1.75-2.50	Low
2.50-3.25	Moderate
3.25-4.00	High

Based on the findings in Table 3, it is found that Malaysian TESL postgraduates applied all the six language learning strategies at a different extent. Among the six learning strategies that had been analysed, the findings portrayed that the most preferred strategies used by Malaysian TESL postgraduates are memory strategies with mean value of 3.64, followed by cognitive strategies ($\mu = 3.56$), metacognitive strategies ($\mu = 3.39$), compensation strategies ($\mu = 3.38$) and affective strategies ($\mu = 3.30$). The least preferred reading strategies by

Malaysian TESL postgraduates were social strategies with a mean score of 2.85. According to the indicator of mean scores interpretation in Table 4, there were five of the strategies interpreted at high level, which implied that the respondents mostly used memory, cognitive, metacognitive, compensation and affective strategies in reading for language learning. On the other hand, social strategies which are at the moderate level, were ranked at the last.

In response to the research question of this study, it is evident that Malaysian TESL postgraduates employed all of the six language learning strategies to enhance their performance on a variety of language tasks in the domain of reading. The finding corresponds to the recent studies on reading strategies used by ESL learners (Dawi & Hashim, 2022; Dawi et al., 2021; Hanafiah et al., 2021; Rojalai et al., 2021; Tiing et al., 2021). Due to their major discipline as a TESL postgraduate, it is believed that they tend to diligently apply more than one type of language learning strategy as a good language learner. Adan and Hashim (2021) supported this argument by claiming that good language learners tend to employ more than one language learning strategy at a time throughout their language learning process.

Among six language learning strategies, the most favoured strategy by Malaysian TESL postgraduate was the memory strategy which encompasses techniques used to recall, retrieve information and transfer them from facts to appropriate skill level to be used (Oxford, 1990). This outcome is similar with the study of (Min et al., 2021; Shi, 2017). This phenomenon could be explained from the respondents' background, in which Politzer (1983) found that language learners' location and background would contribute to differences in the choice of language learning strategy use. For instance, Asians tend to adopt memorization strategies such as rote memorization and language rules instead of communicative strategies (Tyacke & Mendelsohn, 1986), most probably due to the education system and style that they had received in the previous schooling.

In contrast, social strategies are the language learning strategies which were least preferred reading strategies employed by Malaysian TESL postgraduates. Chan and Hashim (2022) stated that social strategies require language learners to participate in activities that involve others such as asking questions, communicating and collaborating with others, sympathy towards others as in creating cultural understanding, understanding the mind and people's feelings. Therefore, it is possible that they do not prefer having interactions with others for either assistance or support in the journey of language learning.

Conclusion

This study had provided an insight on how Malaysian TESL postgraduates employ language learning strategies in reading for acquiring ESL. The findings obtained via the online questionnaire showed that Malaysian TESL postgraduates apply all types of language learning strategies for reading skills. Additionally, the findings depicted that the most employed language learning strategy by Malaysian TESL postgraduates were memory strategies while the least employed language learning strategies were social strategies. In terms of the types of language learning strategies, it is noticeable that Malaysian TESL postgraduates are keen to adopt direct strategies compared to indirect strategies, as the direct strategies were ranked higher than indirect strategies. There were two limitations of this study. First, the respondents of this study were Malaysian TESL postgraduates from a university. Therefore, the findings of this study might not be able to generalise to all TESL postgraduates in Malaysia. As the power

of the study increases with an increase in sample size, future studies are recommended to expand the sample size so that the data would be more valid. Moreover, this study only investigated the language learning strategies applied by Malaysian TESL postgraduates for reading skills. The narrow scope of this study could not shed light on the differences of language learning strategies used by them for different domains of a language, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. Hence, future research is recommended to identify the language learning strategies used for each language skill among Malaysian TESL postgraduates in both public and private tertiary institutions in Malaysia.

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