Language Proficiency of Bachelor of Teaching English as a Second Language Students in a Malaysian Public Education University: A Case Study Exploring their Concerns and Challenges

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Abstract

The current research undertaken investigated the language proficiency of Bachelor of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) students at a public education university in Malaysia. We used a mixed-methods research strategy by combining data collected from completed questionnaires and interview sessions. A total of 126 student volunteers took part in the questionnaire survey, while 10 were selected for the interviews. The findings revealed that students generally struggled with academic English, mainly writing and speaking. Several factors influencing their language proficiency, including their mother tongue and limited exposure to educational practices, to name a few, were identified. We concluded by recommending a multi-pronged strategy for addressing language proficiency.

Keywords: Academic English, English Language Proficiency, Language Proficiency Challenges, Malaysia's Higher Education, TESL Students

Introduction

In today's rapidly changing global education landscape, where countries compete for a pie of international students, having highly proficient English language skills is increasingly essential (Singh & Yunus, 2021; Yaakop et al., 2020). Malaysia aims to be an international education hub for education by attracting 250,000 international students from around the world by 2025 (Rahman & Mohamad, 2023). In sync with Malaysia's ambition, English language proficiency becomes necessary. Hence, teachers in Malaysia must have an excellent command of the English language (Kung & Aziz, 2020) This is particularly true as English is officially a second language, and graduates are expected to communicate effectively in English (Rahman & Mohamad, 2023). As future teachers of English, mastering English

is especially important for TESL students. Failing which, Malaysia's image may be tarnished (Xu et al., 2023)

Numerous research has indicated that Malaysian students are grappling with the English language (Rahman & Mohamad, 2023; Xu et al., 2023). For example, in the 2022 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), an international assessment that measures 15-year-old students' reading, mathematics, and science literacy, Malaysia's PISA results fell to 404 in 2022 from 431 in 2018 overall scores. In the reading assessment, Malaysian students scored 388 in 2022 versus 415 in 2018 (Reflina & P, 2023). Inadvertently, this implies that Malaysian students' command of the English language has fallen. Parents, educators, and politicians are showing growing concern about the overall decline in students' English language skills (Suhaili & Mohama, 2021).

Undoubtedly, the English proficiency of Malaysian university students is declining, but no concerted effort is being made to address this. The fact that this issue has been widely discussed among the media, parliamentarians, employers, educators, and parents (Yaakop et al., 2020); Kung & Aziz, 2020; Hamid & Idrus, 2021) underscores the urgency of the situation. Employers in the private sector have lamented the deplorable state of local graduates' English language skills (Hassan & Jusoh, 2020). Even international schools are questioning the language competency of local TESL students. Therefore, this poses a significant challenge for students pursuing a Bachelor of TESL degree, as they are expected to demonstrate proficiency in the language and set an example for their future students. Many TESL students struggle to master academic English, especially in reading comprehension, language use, and conventions (Zukiflei & Said, 2020). One significant contributing factor to this issue is the inconsistency in the language policy, which has been changing and is believed to be responsible for the decline in English language skills. It is known that every time the Malaysian government changes, Malaysia's language policy changes, too. Therefore, policymakers should consider establishing an effective and consistent language policy to address this issue (Kamsin & Mohamad, 2020).

There are numerous obstacles TESL students encounter while undergoing their teacher training program. They go beyond just language skills. Studies have shown that they struggle with adjusting to academic norms, including critical thinking, problem solving, communication skills, and research, to name a few, which may be entirely novel and unfamiliar (Rifai & Mohammad, 2021; Kansal et al., 2022).

Addressing language proficiency requires understanding students' challenges and issues in language development. Therefore, the current study used strategies incorporating literature review and quantitative and qualitative assessments to provide an insider's perspective on the topic at hand.

Literature Review
Poor English proficiency among Malaysian learners is not a novelty; it is widely reported in the mass media and literature. Factors contributing to this problem, such as first language interference, limited exposure to academic practices, and the inconsistent implementation of language policies, to name a few, have been identified (Hamid & Idrus, 2021; Nawi & Nor, 2023).

Competency in communicating in English among local graduates has been a source of concern, with many stakeholders, such as private sector employers and parents, voicing dissatisfaction. This issue extends to TESL students, who are expected to show a high level of English proficiency to serve as role models for their future students (Palpanadan et al., 2020). A possible reason for their lack of language competency is the mismatch between their writing skills taught at school and the requirements of university-level writing (Florence, 2020; Qian, 2023).

The Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis
The Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis proposed by Jim Cummins is one relevant theory related to students' language proficiency. It suggests that students' second language (L2) development depends on their first language (L1) competency (Cummins, 1979). A successful transfer of L1 language skills and cognitive abilities can, thus, take place. Its implications are enormous since proficiency in L1, often Malay, can either help or hinder their English language development and, therefore, academic success.

Factors Influencing English Language Proficiency
The student's first language can indeed pose a challenge to their English language acquisition (Yaakop et al., 2020; Zukiflei & Said, 2020; Cosmiano, 2023). This is particularly evident in students' productive skills such as listening, reading, speaking, and writing. For example, teacher interference in forcing students to break the silence in class may backfire. Consequently, poorly prepared students may exhibit poor oral presentation skills, especially if they have low language proficiency. However, they can mitigate this interference by creating an environment that respects students' language backgrounds and minimising interference, leading to better student performance (Mbato, 2020).

Numerous studies have identified the mismatch between pre-university or pre-college literacy practices and the demands of university-level literacy expectations (Avila et al., 2021). Limited exposure to academic practices and conventions can lead to academic failure at the tertiary level, where high language proficiency is required (Marita & Jufrizal, 2021).

Educators and politicians alike have voiced their disapproval of the ever-changing language policies with every change of government. As a result, Malaysians' English language skills have declined, as evidenced by employers' assertion of graduates' lack of communication skills and lower scores for PISA (Suhaili & Mohama, 2021; Renganathan, 2021). With Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) replacing English as a medium of instruction driven by political expediency, Malaysian students' English language skills are affected negatively. The government has to pull the bull by the horns. It has to make a decisive stand on the English language or see Malaysians' standard of English decline even further (Yaakop et al., 2020; Suhaili & Mohama, 2021).

Political interference, ill-equipped infrastructure, overcrowded classes, local teachers' poor language skills and insufficient qualified English teachers add to the current problems. If these long-standing issues are not addressed expeditiously, properly and decisively, Malaysia will continue to produce graduates who lack communication skills and are ill-prepared for the economy (Nesaratnam et al., 2020; Rido, 2020; John et al., 2021; Suraprajit, 2021; Rivera & Villanueva, 2023).

Concerns and Challenges Faced by TESL Students
The concerns and challenges faced by TESL students are as follows:

Lack of Confidence in Language Skills
A common gripe TESL students have is self-confidence. Because of this, their ability to communicate and engage in classroom activities is affected negatively (Liskinasih et al., 2020; Rofi'i & Nurhidayat, 2020). The deficiencies are in grammar, vocabulary, sentence construction, and overall fluency (Ahsan et al., 2020). If left unchecked, students' language development is hampered, which can affect their future employability prospects and professional development (Liskinasih et al., 2020; Rofi'i & Nurhidayat, 2020).

Difficulty in Mastering all four Language Skills
Failure to master the four language skills can have negative repercussions as these skills are necessary ingredients to language proficiency (Liskinasih et al., 2020). Malaysian TESL undergraduates often struggle to master them (Liskinasih et al., 2020). For example, reading comprehension requires students to use a combination of skills such as decoding, vocabulary, fluency, background knowledge, sentence construction, and cohesion, to name a few. Reading comprehension will succeed if these skills are present (Duke et al., 2021). Likewise, university writing conventions differ from those in primary and secondary schools. Therefore, developing proficiency in the four language skills according to university standards and demands ensures that TESL students succeed in their studies and be role models for their future students (Liu, 2020).

Challenges in Academic Writing
Academic writing is another problem Malaysian ESL students face. Language use, punctuation, and academic writing conventions are areas for improvement. It is a critical skill every undergraduate must have to ensure success in higher education (Nawi & Nor, 2023).

Inadequate or Outdated Writing Instruction
A possible reason for language proficiency deficiency is inadequate or outdated writing instructions. Focusing on formulaic essay structures or grammar-based exercises does not provide students with the rigours and demands of academic writing at the university level. To address this, comprehensive and up-to-date writing instructions should be considered, including critical thinking, research-based analysis, and guided practice, to name a few (Palpanadan et al., 2019; Bangkam & Hashim, 2020).

Influence of the L1 on English Language Development
L1 interference is discernible in various facets of language use for the TESL students, including syntax, vocabulary, and overall fluency. A particularly problematic area is in writing tasks where students are expected to know academic English at university level. They need to adhere to the conventions and expectations of academic English (Marita & Jufrizal, 2021).

Influence of Language Policies on English Language Proficiency
Changing language policies with every change of the Malaysian government has lowered the Malaysian standard of English. The unpredictability and instability created only worsen this problem (Yaakop et al., 2020; Hamid & Idrus, 2021; Renganathan, 2021). The lack of stability and clear direction in the language policies has made it difficult for teachers. They become

disoriented and, therefore, their students are affected academically (Islam, 2023). This inconsistency has undermined the efforts to prioritise and strengthen English language learning, thus, gradually eroding Malaysian students' English proficiency (Renganathan, 2021).

Cultural and Educational Differences
Malaysia's ambition of being a top global educational destination for foreign students requires competent educators and well-equipped educational infrastructure. However, a surge in international student enrolments may have an unintended consequence. Local students may face challenges adapting to the cultural and academic differences their foreign counterparts bring to the classroom (Yusuf, 2020). Any difficulties in collaboration, communication, and exchanging ideas can ultimately impact the overall learning experience for the local TESL students (Magnaye, 2020; Rifai & Mohammad, 2021).

Curriculum Content and Relevance
The TESL curriculum and its content must meet the needs of the English language teaching industry (Mohamad et al., 2023). The program must produce TESL graduates who are ready to teach. These graduates must have all the required skills, including pedagogical and soft skills, for the demands of the English teaching field (Ag-Ahmad et al., 2023). Therefore, universities must evaluate their TESL curriculum regularly and consistently to ensure that it supports the growing needs of the teaching profession (Balconi & Spitzman, 2020; Thibaut & McLaughlin, 2022).

Teaching Methods and Approaches
To ensure student teachers benefit from their TESL program, universities should use and impart the latest teaching methods and approaches to language learning and teaching. Traditional lecture-based instruction and teacher-centric approaches can no longer meet the rigours of the program (Patunob & Ibojo, 2023). A more student-centred, interactive, and technology-enhanced teaching method should be explored (Nasir & Azlina, 2020). The aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that teachers must be IT literate. Therefore, having an IT literacy module is necessary (Parra, 2021).

The Significance of the Study
This study investigated the specific challenges TESL students faced. We propose establishing support systems and implementing targeted interventions to improve TESL students' language proficiency and preparedness for future roles. We argue that the findings from this research can help curriculum developers develop more effective TESL programs, curriculum design, and teacher professional development initiatives, eventually contributing to the success of English language education in Malaysia.

Research Objectives and Questions
The primary objectives of this study are:
1. To examine the specific language proficiency concerns and challenges that Bachelor of TESL students face in a Malaysian public education university.
2. To investigate the impact of language proficiency issues on TESL students' academic and professional development.

3. To propose strategies and interventions that can be implemented to improve the English language proficiency of TESL students in Malaysian public universities.

To achieve these objectives, the study will address the following research questions:
1. What are the specific language proficiency concerns and challenges that Bachelor of TESL students face in a Malaysian public education university?
2. How do language proficiency issues impact TESL students' academic and professional development?
3. What strategies and interventions can be implemented to improve the English language proficiency of TESL students in Malaysian public universities?

Methodology
This research paper used a mixed-methods approach, using a systematic review of the existing literature, combining quantitative assessment with qualitative interviews from student volunteers of a Malaysian public education university.

The approach allowed for a comprehensive and multifaceted exploration of the topic, providing a robust foundation for understanding the subtleties and complexities of the language proficiency challenges faced by TESL students in Malaysian public universities.

Participants
Combining quantitative and qualitative assessments, the study explored the language proficiency concerns and challenges faced by Bachelor of TESL students in a Malaysian public education university. Quantitative data was collected through questionnaires from 126 students (101 females, 25 males). Qualitative data was gathered from interviews with ten students.   A literature review was made to dissect and understand the complexities of language proficiency. *See Table 1 below*.

Table 1: Participants

Gender	Age (years)						Total
	22	23	24	25	26	27	
Female	17	72	8	3	0	1	101 (80%)
Male	4	12	5	2	2	0	25 (20%)
						Total	126 (100%)

Instruments
The study utilised a combination of research instruments to collect data:
1. Quantitative data was collected through questionnaires to assess TESL students' perceived English language proficiency and language anxiety. The language anxiety questionnaire used in the study is well-regarded in recent research due to its comprehensive coverage. Previous studies have shown high reliability for this 33-item, 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, with Cronbach's alpha values up to 0.932. The instrument measured participants' responses on a numerical scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," with scores from 5 to 1. Therefore, this survey instrument was considered appropriate for use in this study. However, the researchers adapted and modified the questionnaire, using 16 items on a 5-point Likert scale. The questions were categorised into themes such as "General Anxiety in English Classes" (1 item), "Speaking Anxiety" (3

items), "Listening Anxiety" (5 items), "Writing Anxiety" (4 items), and "Reading Anxiety" (3 items). The data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 29.0.0.0 software.

2. The qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with a sample of ten TESL students, which explored their perspectives on language proficiency challenges and their impact on academic and professional development.

3. The study's findings were presented in two main sections: 1) language proficiency challenges identified from the quantitative survey and 2) qualitative insights into the nature and impact of these challenges.

Pilot Study
Before assessing the internal consistency reliability of questionnaire items, a pilot study was carried out with 7 participants. The resulting Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.858 (*see Table 2* below) from the primary data indicated that the items exhibited high internal consistency, implying that the questionnaire was reliable.

Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.857	.858	16

Findings
Language Proficiency Challenges Identified from the Quantitative Survey
The quantitative survey revealed several key language proficiency challenges faced by the TESL students, including:

1. Perceived English Proficiency Level: According to the survey, 1.6% of the TESL students felt they had poor language proficiency, 17.5% thought they had an average English proficiency, 72.2% felt their English proficiency was good, and 8.7% said their proficiency was very good.

Table 3: Self-perceived English Language Proficiency Level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Poor	2	1.6	1.6	1.6
	Average	22	17.5	17.5	19.0
	Good	91	72.2	72.2	91.3
	Very Good	11	8.7	8.7	100.0
	Total	126	100.0	100.0	

2. The TESL students' Malaysian University English Test (MUET) scores ranged from Bands 4 to 5, indicating that majority, 65.1%, achieved an independent user level at CEFR B2 (MUET bands 4 and 4.5). In comparison, 19.8% reached a proficient user level at CEFR C1 (MUET band 5). *See Table 4 below.* Despite their overall language proficiency, the study revealed that the TESL students still experienced high levels of speaking anxiety during English oral presentations. To improve their fluency, these students may benefit from increased opportunities for English conversation practice, both inside and outside the classroom, as well as targeted instruction on techniques to enhance their speaking skills, such as pacing, using transitional phrases, and developing confidence in spontaneous communication (Nadesan & Shah, 2020; Nawai & Said, 2020).

Table 4. Malaysian University English Test Band

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent	CEFR Level	User
Valid	Band 4	82	65.1	65.1	65.1	B2	Independent (Intermediate Level)
	Band 4.5	25	19.8	19.8	84.9	B2	
	Band 5	19	15.1	15.1	100.0	C1	Proficient (Advanced Level)
	Total	126	100.0	100.0			

Note: CEFR – Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

3. **Difficulties in academic writing**: The results showed 72% feared making grammatical mistakes, while 28% thought grammar was difficult. Therefore, the students needed help in various aspects of academic writing.

4. **Difficulties in oral communication**: The data analysis showed fascinating but disturbing results. 36% of the respondents said they were anxious when speaking in English, while 27% were hesitant to talk in class. When speaking to a native English teacher, 43% were nervous. These findings highlight students' challenges in adapting to academic English at the university level. To improve fluency and confidence, students ought to be given ample opportunities for English conversation practice inside and outside the classroom. Targeted instructions on techniques for enhancing speaking skills, such as pausing, pacing, and transitional phrases or linking words, should be used.

5. **Limited proficiency in essential language skills**: 24% of TESL students struggled with English grammar and the subtleties of the language. 36% were anxious when speaking, and 72% feared making grammatical mistakes. Because of their lack of language abilities, 62% were anxious whenever they were in an English class. Numerous studies have shown that English language learners often face challenges with essential language skills (Mancilla-Martinez, 2020; Rafiq et al., 2022).

6. **High levels of language anxiety**: The survey results revealed that many TESL students experienced moderate language anxiety with mean between 2.34 and 3.32 out of possible 5.

7. **Difficulties in academic reading and comprehension**: 23% of the TESL students feared reading aloud because they feared making mistakes, while 54% preferred silent reading. The interview sessions we had with them explored this further, highlighting that the students had difficulty with academic English, including reading comprehension.

8. **Listening skill challenges**: 41% (mean = 2.84) of the TESL students found it difficult to understand people with different accents, while 58% worried they could not comprehend those who spoke too quickly. 15% (mean = 3.57) said they struggled to grasp English stress and intonation.

To sum up, the quantitative data analysis revealed that TESL students faced various language proficiency challenges which need to be addressed.

Table 5: General Language Anxiety in English Language

No.	Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
1.	GLA1. I get anxious when I am in an English Class	31 (25%)	47 (37%)	27 (21%)	16 (13%)	5 (4%)	126 (100%)
		78 (62%)			21 (17%)		
2.	SSA 2. I am anxious when I speak English in class.	19 (15%)	27 (21%)	28 (22%)	38 (30%)	14 (11%)	126 (100%)
		46 (36%)			52 (41%)		
3.	SSA 3. I feel overwhelmed by the number of rules I have to learn to speak English.	12 (10%)	18 (14%)	36 (28%)	48 (38%)	12 (10%)	126 (100%)
		30 (24%)			60 (48%)		
4.	SSA 4. I feel more tense and nervous in my speaking class than in my other English classes.	19 (15%)	28 (22%)	28 (22%)	34 (27%)	17 (14%)	126 (100%)
		47 (37%)			51 (41%)		
5.	SSA 5. I would be nervous speaking English with my teacher who is a native speaker.	21 (17%)	33 (26%)	13 (10%)	46 (37%)	13 (10%)	126 (100%)
		54 (43%)			59 (47%)		
6.	SSA 6. I am hesitant to speak with my teacher in class.	13 (10%)	21 (17%)	26 (20%)	45 (36%)	21 (17%)	126 (100%)
		34 (27%)			66 (53%)		
7.	LSA 7. It is difficult to understand people with English pronunciation that is different from mine.	14 (11%)	37 (30%)	33 (26%)	39 (31%)	3 (2%)	126 (100%)
		51 (41%)			42 (33%)		
8.	LSA 8. I worry that I might not be able to understand when people talk too fast.	17 (14%)	56 (44%)	23 (18%)	26 (21%)	4 (3%)	126 (100%)
		73 (58%)			30 (24%)		
9.	LSA 9. I am not very familiar with English stress and intonation patterns.	5 (4%)	14 (11%)	28 (22%)	62 (49%)	17 (14%)	126 (100%)
		19 (15%)			79 (63%)		
10.	WSA 10. I am afraid that I might make grammatical mistakes in English writing.	31 (24%)	60 (48%)	13 (10%)	21 (17%)	1 (1%)	126 (100%)
		91 (72%)			22 (18%)		
11.	WSA 11. Grammar is too difficult in English writing.	6 (5%)	29 (23%)	37 (29%)	45 (36%)	9 (7%)	126 (100%)
		35 (28%)			54 (43%)		
12.	WSA 12. I could not express my ideas well in English.	8 (6%)	14 (11%)	30 (24%)	49 (39%)	25 (20%)	126 (100%)
		22 (17%)			74 (59%)		
13.	WSA 13. I worry at all about what other people would think of my English compositions.	12 (9%)	43 (34%)	36 (29%)	28 (22%)	7 (6%)	126 (100%)
		55 (43%)			35 (28%)		
14.	RSA 14. I feel anxious in reading aloud in fear of making errors.	6 (5%)	23 (18%)	13 (10%)	54 (43%)	30 (24%)	126 (100%)
		29 (23%)			84 (67%)		
15.	RSA 15. I prefer silent reading rather to reading aloud.	40 (32%)	28 (22%)	27 (21%)	19 (15%)	12 (10%)	126 (100%)
		68 (54%)			31 (25%)		
16.	RSA 16. I get upset when I am not sure whether I understand what I am reading in English or not.	13 (10%)	40 (32%)	26 (21%)	39 (31%)	8 (6%)	126 (100%)
		53 (42%)			47 (37%)		

Table 6: Language Anxiety - Mean, median and standard deviation

		General Anxiety in English Classes (GLA 1)	Speaking Anxiety in English Classes (SSA 2)	Speaking Anxiety in English Classes (SSA 3)	Speaking Anxiety in English Classes (SSA 4)	Listening Anxiety in English Classes (SSA 5)	Listening Anxiety in English Classes (SSA 6)	Listening Anxiety in English Classes (LSA 7)
N	Valid	126	126	126	126	126	126	126
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		2.34	3.01	3.24	3.02	2.98	3.32	2.84
Median		2.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	3.00
Std. Deviation		1.104	1.255	1.113	1.284	1.311	1.231	1.061
Minimum		1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Maximum		5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Interpretation to be read with findings in Table 1 above		Moderately on higher end	Average	Average	Average	Low	Low	Low to Average

		Listening Anxiety in English Classes (LSA 8)	Listening Anxiety in English Classes (LSA 9)	Writing Anxiety in English Classes (WSA 10)	Writing Anxiety in English Classes (WSA 11)	Writing Anxiety in English Classes (WSA 12)	Writing Anxiety in English Classes (WSA 13)
N	Valid	126	126	126	126	126	126
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		2.56	3.57	2.21	3.17	3.55	2.80
Median		2.00	4.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	3.00
Std. Deviation		1.062	.991	1.025	1.020	1.121	1.066
Minimum		1	1	1	1	1	1
Maximum		5	5	5	5	5	5
Interpretation to be read with findings in Table 1 above		Moderately on higher end	Low	Above Average	Low to Average	Low	Low

		Reading Anxiety in English Classes (RSA 14)	Reading Anxiety in English Classes (RSA 15)	Reading Anxiety in English Classes (RSA 16)
N	126	126	126	126
	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.63	2.48	2.91
Median		4.00	2.00	3.00
Std. Deviation		1.171	1.331	1.139
Minimum		1	1	1
Maximum		5	5	5
Interpretation to be read with findings in Table 1 above		Low	Average	Low

Extracts of Student Interviews
The qualitative interviews with TESL students provided a better understanding of their language proficiency. Below are excerpts from the interview sessions:

1. "I feel so stressed speaking in English. I have to be careful about what to say and how to say. I have to be mindful of my grammar."

2. "I often struggle to understand the readings given by my lecturers. They are a lot. On top of that, I struggle to take down lecture notes because they talk too fast or I just cannot catch up with the lecture. I feel like I'm constantly playing catch-up and that is tiring."

3. "The program assumes that every TESL student has high language proficiency. But we are still developing our language abilities. It is just too challenging for me."

4. "I sometimes feel like I don't belong here because I'm not as proficient in English as my peers. It's really discouraging and makes me question whether I can succeed in this program. In fact, sometimes I feel like throwing in the towel."

The Impact of these Issues on Academic and Professional Development
Failure to master the four language skills may impede TESL students' language proficiency and academic progress. High levels of language anxiety can worsen their problems, undermining their confidence and self-efficacy. Consequently, they be less interested to take part in class activities, for example, class discussions, thereby, limiting their opportunities to practise and improve their language skills.

If problems with academic writing are not addressed, they can lead to poorly produced assignments that do not meet academic writing standards. Challenges in academic can hinder TESL students' ability to grasp course materials and lectures, thus making it more difficult to cultivate the critical thinking and analytical skills essential for academic success.

Language proficiency issues can have lasting implications for employability and professional development. They may struggle to secure teaching positions, which ultimately constrain their career prospects and opportunities for growth as TESL professionals.

Discussion and Recommendations
Research Question 1. What are the specific language proficiency concerns and challenges that Bachelor of TESL students face in a Malaysian public education university?

The findings from the quantitative and qualitative assessments revealed the following:
- TESL students encountered difficulties in the four language skills. These challenges varied in intensity. For example, academic writing was considered to be more severe than speaking.
- They need help in academic English, particularly in areas of writing, speaking and reading.
- They have moderate anxiety stemming from fear of making mistakes and perceived lack of confidence in English.
- They lack communication skills and confidence in public speaking such as delivering oral presentations and articulating their ideas in class.
- They tend to mingle with students from their own ethnic group or do not have the opportunity to mix with students from different races because their class is made up of one ethnic group.

If the above issues are not addressed, they can have long-term consequences for the TESL students' future careers as language educators, as their ability to effectively communicate and collaborate may be hindered.

Research Question 2. How do language proficiency issues impact TESL students' academic and professional development?

As future English teachers and role models for their students, TESL students must address any shortcomings head-on. Problems identified must be tackled by the students, educators, schools, or universities. Language anxiety and proficiency highlighted can have undesirable effects on TESL students, like decreased motivation, lower academic performance and reduced communication, to name a few. These underlying problems can undermine their confidence and self-efficacy. Consequently, it can lead to their willingness to participate in class discussions, deliver presentations, and engage with peers and teachers. Their future prospects for employment may be at stake.

Research Question 3. What strategies and interventions can be implemented to improve the English language proficiency of TESL students in Malaysian public universities?

A multi-pronged approach is recommended and as follows:

a. Curriculum and Instructional Reviews
A review of the current curriculum may be warranted. Curriculum design and development should focus, among other things, on academic English, which comprises the four language skills. Targeted English courses and workshops should be identified to allow students to practise and improve their language skills. The program should be interactive and student-centred, where students are engaged in their own learning and personal growth.

b. Student Support Services and Language Support Resources
In institutes of higher learning, student support services are available to all students. However, the service types available vary among universities around the world. For Malaysian teaching universities and colleges, they should consider including the use of small group tutoring and mentoring, especially for struggling students. Personalised language support and feedback should be available. A range of language support resources should be available. Workshops on academic writing, oral presentations, and research skills, to name a few, can be considered. They are handy for the TESL students. Online language learning platforms, instructional videos and available self-help study materials can supplement classroom instructions. Last but not least, language and anxiety counselling should also be considered.

c. Faculty Development
Training and resources for TESL faculty should be adequate to support teaching staff in delivering effective lessons. Teaching staff professional development is important for their professional growth. Attending the latest advancements in language teaching, for instance, will equip them with the skills to meet the evolving teaching profession. Empowering the staff to be involved in curriculum development helps ensure that the teaching curriculum remains up-to-date and relevant.

d. Collaboration with External Stakeholders
Partnering organisations, whether local or international, in delivering English courses should be considered. Language immersion and student and staff exchange programs with other universities or colleges can bring many benefits for the students, teaching staff, and universities. The benefits include revenues generated and invaluable experience students and

staff gain from student and staff exchanges with other universities, to name a few. Engaging stakeholders in curriculum development and design helps to ensure the TESL curriculum stays relevant and up-to-date.

e. Longitudinal Monitoring and Evaluation

Universities and teaching institutes should implement robust assessment and tracking mechanisms to monitor the language proficiency levels of TESL students throughout their program and after graduation. The data collected can be used to refine and improve the language support and interventions offered to TESL students on a continuous basis.

Importantly, these interventions should be integrated throughout the TESL program rather than offered as isolated or remedial components. By adopting a comprehensive, multifaceted approach, Malaysian public universities can empower TESL students to develop their language proficiency and confidence they need to succeed academically and professionally as language educators (Jaramillo et al., 2020).

Conclusion

We have provided valuable insights into the language proficiency concerns and challenges Bachelor of TESL students face in a Malaysian public education university. The findings suggest that TESL students often need more confidence in their language skills and help mastering the four language skills so that their future employability is not at stake. Addressing these issues requires a multipronged approach involving enhanced writing instruction, student-centred learning, strengthened language policies, incorporating effective language acquisition strategies, and the provision of targeted language support services. Only when these issues are addressed TESL programs in Malaysia can better equip their students with the necessary language proficiency to thrive as effective language educators and contribute to the nation's educational goals (Nasir & Azlina, 2020; Nawi & Nor, 2023; Xu et al., 2023; Ag-Ahmad et al., 2023).

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