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Exploring 21st-century ESL classroom challenges: A case study of Malaysian secondary school teachers

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative exploratory case study investigates the challenges faced by Malaysian secondary school English as Second Language (ESL) teachers in integrating 21st-century learning skills into the ESL classroom. It also examines the presence and extent of collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity during ESL lessons. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight teachers from four national secondary schools in Malaysia, followed by focus group interviews with the same participants for triangulation purposes. Thematic analysis was employed to identify emerging patterns and themes. The analysis revealed the following four major challenges: lack of confidence, low motivation, administrative burdens and insufficient resources. All four 21st-century skills were evident in classroom practices with collaboration being the most dominant and creativity the least visible. The findings underscore the critical need to address existing barriers, enhance teaching capacities in 21st-century skills, and implement activities that promote critical thinking, creativity, communication, and collaboration within ESL classrooms. The study highlights the necessity for creative strategies to foster student motivation and engagement in English learning and to encourage the development of creative thinking among ESL students in Malaysian secondary schools.

Contribution/Originality: This study investigates the integration of 21st-century abilities in Malaysian ESL classes through individual interviews and focus group triangulation, providing an extensive thematic analysis. In contrast to previous studies, it emphasizes the relative visibility of each skill and explicitly identifies creativity as the most underdeveloped competency.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past decades, teachers worldwide including in Malaysia have continuously striven towards their students' mastery of the 3Rs of learning namely (reading, writing and arithmetic). Although these are still the fundamental building blocks of learning in the 21st century ever evolving education landscape there are added skills that are needed for students to retain competence and eventually to be able to participate competitively in the job market. The Ministry of Education (MOE) through the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 has

included 21st century skills as part of its educational goals to create high-quality human capital to align with the demand from the industry (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 - 2025 (Preschool to Post-secondary Education), 2013).

The MOE has defined 21st century skills as *"a set of skills and competencies that are aligned with the National Education Philosophy and will give Malaysian students an international competitive edge"* (Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 - 2025 (Preschool to Post-secondary Education), 2013).

MOE has come up with a roadmap that included a big shift in the education system from the New Primary Schools Curriculum (KBSR :Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah) and Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM :Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah) to Standard- Based Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR :Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah) and Standard- Based Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KSSM :Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah) together with School- Based Assessments (PBS :Pentaksiran Berasaskan Sekolah) to produce students who possess those skills. All the latest elements are holistic since they include cognitive, affective and psychometric assessments which are in line with the National Education Philosophy (NEP). MOE is also committed to upgrade the assessment framework so that more Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTs) questions can be included to ensure that students can not only understand and apply but also to analyze, evaluate and create based on the knowledge that they gain in the classroom. The assessments also include creative and problem-solving skills. The outcomes that Malaysia hopes to produce from the revamped education system is high-quality human capital with 21st century skills and this would mean students who are balanced, resilient, inquisitive, principled, informed, caring, patriotic and who are also effective thinkers, communicators and team players.

With the shift of the curriculum to the standard-based curricula for both primary and secondary schools in Malaysia, beginning in 2013, there has been a gradual change of key components. Figure 1 shows some of the key differences between KBSR and KSSR.
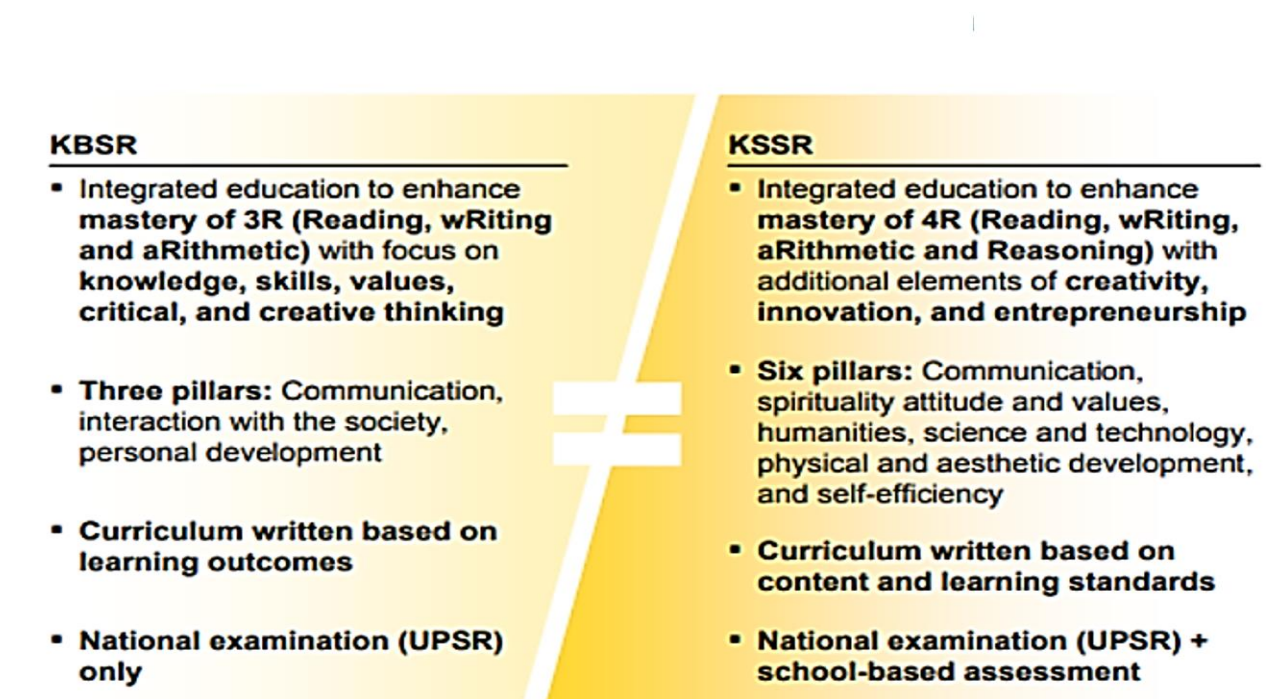
Figure 1. Main differences between KBSR and KSSR curricula

Source: Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 - 2025 (preschool to post-secondary education) (2013).

From the diagram above, it is clear that there is now a requirement for mastery of reasoning apart from the 3R's as well as additional elements of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship which were not overtly found in KBSR. The obvious and deliberate inclusion of these skills reflects the Malaysian government's serious intent for their students to eventually be able to compete on a global platform.

The curriculum design also has changed from a learning outcome - based curriculum to content and learning standard-based curriculum. The former Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) which had been conducted as the sole national exam for primary schools was first combined with School-Based Assessment (PBS). Subsequently, in April 2021, MOE announced the abolition of UPSR leaving the school-based assessment as the sole and seemingly best way to educate students in a holistic manner (FMT Reporters, 2023).

According to Saleh (2019) students in the 21st century should possess a diverse set of skills to remain competitive in the real world and future employment markets. In other words, education should equip students with the competencies and attributes required to meet the evolving demands of industry and the workforce.

The skills that students should acquire through 21st century education include problem-solving, learning, collaboration, and communication abilities among others (Bani-Amer, 2022). Teachers should help students develop these skills in order to produce students who can meet current industry demands.

The traditional teaching method should be replaced with a student-centered approach to ensure that students can acquire 21st century skills. Traditional teaching methods are always associated with teacher-centered learning, passive learning, and minimal interaction between teachers and students as well as between students themselves (Eryilmaz, Adalar, & Icinak, 2015). On the other hand, Dada, Laseinde, and Tartibu (2023) stated that student-centered learning encourages student participation in class activities, enhances learning outcomes, and promotes lifelong learning skills. Students will develop their communication and collaboration skills and can work with peers from diverse backgrounds through student-centered activities such as Project-Based Learning (PBL), presentations, etc. This will aid in the development of students' critical thinking, particularly when the task entails decision-making, and assist them in becoming more creative in order to come up with out-of-the-box solutions. The same applies in the teaching and learning of the English language including countries like Malaysia where English has the status of a second language. The strategies used for the teaching of English and the teaching methods need to be aligned with the goals of the standardized curriculum which in turn reflects the ultimate goals of the Malaysia Education Blueprint for English language proficiency. However, many teachers in Malaysia have failed to comply with this directive and continued to use the teacher-centered approach because they were trained to fit into the exam-oriented system (Mudin, 2019). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the challenges faced by teachers when conducting English lessons and to identify the teacher perspectives on what worked effectively in their language classroom settings. The study also aims to provide some insight into how teachers aim to develop crucial 21st century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication skills and collaborative skills in their English language classroom.

In view of the objective mentioned above, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by Malaysian ESL teachers while conducting English lessons?
2. To what extent do the activities conducted in the ESL classroom help students to enhance creativity, critical thinking, collaborative skills, and communication skills?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Related Studies

Previous studies have mentioned that changes in educational policies, technology, student population and methodology are causing major problems in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in Malaysian secondary schools in the 21st century (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2015; Muthukrishnan, Fung Lan, Anandhan, & Swamy, 2024; Zakaria, Di, & Yunus, 2017). Among the challenges that Malaysian secondary school teachers face is the implementation of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 which calls for the teaching of English as a medium of instruction in several subjects. This policy shift has caused a deep concern for ESL teachers to ensure that students acquire the language skills in English while at the same time learning the content of other subjects (Nair & Arshad, 2018). Furthermore, the shift in teaching pedagogy also requires Malaysian ESL teachers

to be more creative in their way of teaching since the new system emphasizes student-centered approach. Unlike the traditional approach, teachers now need to keep updated with current findings on language teaching and learning (Dass, Hay, & Harun, 2021; Kiang & Yunus, 2021).

Lin (2019) proposes the utilization of spoken word poetry (SWP) to improve critical thinking skills in literature learning. This can be seen as the manifestation of the need for new teaching and learning methodologies in the ESL classroom to keep up with the changing demand. Besides, Veramuthu and Shah (2020) stress the pedagogical significance of peer review, highlighting the need for more interactive and student-centered classroom teaching styles to improve English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students' writing ability. Other papers detail how to improve learning processes from an instructional and teacher competence perspective. Sulaiman and Ismail (2020) explore the correlation between the competencies of teachers and 21st-century learning skills and stress the need for teachers' professional development to prepare them to teach in the 21st century.

Furthermore, Dewi and Alam (2020) investigate the role of character education and how the teacher's tasks are to instill values and habits necessary for the 21st-century digital citizen, which helps to further justify the necessity of the ESL classroom to be holistic in nature. Moreover, among the deliberations that Malaysian teachers must consider with regards to the introduction of technology within the ESL classroom is highlighted by Yen and Mohamad (2021), they mention the new norms of learning in a pandemic era, including the necessity for students to be digitally competitive. Consequently, e-learning and the use of online platforms, such as Google Classroom have become indispensable tools for the teacher in reaching out to students and a way to engage them in a virtual classroom. There is a current shift toward innovative teaching methods and technology integration in the ESL classroom but Malaysian secondary school teachers are still faced with challenges. According to Walker (2016), cyberbullying was identified as a major issue faced by Malaysian teachers. He noted that the ethical and effective treatment of this menace is a challenge for teachers in the classroom. Another challenge faced by Malaysian teachers in the implementation of 21st-century skills in the online classroom was highlighted by Idriki and Tan (2022) raised the issue of the demands of the profession and how teachers are overwhelmed by the new demands of teaching in the digital age. The study recommended continuous teacher training in response to the challenges facing Malaysian teachers in the implementation of their profession.

Based on the literature discussed above, it is clear that Malaysian secondary school teachers are faced with a range of challenges in the 21st-century ESL classroom, including the challenges of integrating technology with innovative teaching methods, cyberbullying and character education. Moreover, Malaysian secondary school students are facing these challenges and teachers need to have the knowledge and skills to implement the demands of this new ESL environment to cater to their needs. This will ensure that the Malaysian students achieve their required educational outcomes. These students will enter the world of work and need to be prepared to perform to the best of their abilities. This is why it is incumbent on Malaysian educational institutions to ensure that teachers continue to research these challenges and keep abreast of changes in the profession. Additionally, they need to acknowledge the importance of providing continuous professional development for all teachers so that collectively, they can address the challenges of the 21st-century ESL classroom.

2.2. The Characteristics of 21st Century Teaching and Learning

From the traditional teacher-centered chalk and talk type of teaching and learning experience, teaching methods have evolved significantly over the past few decades towards a more student-centered approach which is in line with the needs of the 21st century school classroom. The current educational landscape with its diverse student population also calls out for pedagogy that is characteristic of 21st century learning needs and skills. The fundamental characteristics of instruction and learning in the twenty-first century include student-centered learning, collaboration, technology integration, and learning materials that are effective (Sumardi, Rohman, & Wahyudiati, 2020). The 21st-century learning also places a greater emphasis on the well-being of students, their

participation in the learning process, and the teachers' roles as facilitators of the learning process. Knowledge and comprehension are collaboratively generated through classroom activities with teachers providing guidance rather than being the source of the information. This will also contribute towards the development of interpersonal skills, which is another key projected outcome in 21st century classrooms.

The incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICT) into classroom teaching and learning experience is also a significant characteristic of 21st century learning which by itself is almost synonymous with the era of digitalization. Both teacher and learner will need the required ICT competencies to meet this criterion (Bedir, 2019). Teaching will become more interactive, and students will gain greater exposure to the outside world by incorporating the latest educational technologies into the classroom. Utilizing cutting-edge technology and high-tech devices will also assist students with self-learning.

2.3. The 4Cs Skills in the 21st Century English Language Classroom

Although 21st century skills encompass a diverse range of required competencies, four main components which are commonly known as the "4Cs skills" are significant targeted outcomes that students are hoped to master. These skills refer to (1) critical thinking, (2) creative thinking, (3) collaboration, and (4) communication. Studies on the role of critical thinking skills have shown the positive correlation between critical thinking and student performance (Lin, 2019). Critical thinking skills are also fundamental in promoting intrinsic motivation or self-motivation towards active lifelong learning (Saleh, 2019). Students are encouraged to examine issues from multiple and even unconventional perspectives and this will also encourage independent learning resulting in fresh viewpoints. Since students can evaluate a problem from a variety of perspectives, the solutions they would propose would be creative and more effective.

Strategies for promoting critical thinking in the classroom usually focus on active-participative methods, especially in smaller groups through activities, such as debates, media analysis, problem resolution, and self and peer evaluation (Saleh, 2019; Zarei & Layeq, 2016) . Creative thinking, which is the next skill, often revolves around an individual's capacity to express ideas using one's own methods (Kurniawati, 2022). To cultivate creativity, one must envision existing conditions, create new characters or situations, and explain the solutions and actions in detail. Teachers are encouraged to design their lessons with the intention of encouraging students' creative thinking by employing a variety of techniques that encourage students to think differently, analyze the information, and present it creatively (Bedir, 2019; Kurniawati, 2022). Methods to foster creativity include combination thinking which focuses on the generation of new ideas by adapting old approaches to unfamiliar situations while retaining their understandability. Exploratory and transformative approaches which require students to investigate the possibilities through trial-and-error while adhering to the established rules are also other methods teachers can use to encourage creative thinking in the language classroom. Encouraging students' experimentation with words without fear of negative reprisals will also help to raise creative thinking in the language classroom.

The skills of collaboration and communication are always complementary, and this is especially obvious in the 21st century language classroom. One must be skilled in communication to collaborate effectively (Bedir, 2019). Collaboration is defined as working with others as a group and voluntarily contributing skills to complete a task. Bedir (2019) defined as communication is the capacity to effectively transmit information through multiple channels, such as written or spoken language, and to receive information through listening and reading. For the process of idea exchange to occur, and to help students learn how to make decisions, solve problems and propose solutions, both the skills of collaboration and communication are vital (Kurniawati, 2022). The cultivation of these skills in the language classroom can be enhanced through providing authentic situations which require students to collaborate and communicate, including social media platforms, journals, and online video calls apart from real-time face- to- face interactions.

317

2.4. Underpinning Theory

In this study, Malaysian secondary school teachers are examined on their challenges that they are facing in the 21st-century ESL classroom. The study's foundation is rooted in several main theories, such as Piaget (1953) and Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist (c). Learners in constructivist learning learn at different paces and speed. They learn at different stages. This theory will tell us that it is necessary for teachers to pay attention to and understand students' learning stage so that we can become better teachers. If teachers understand the stage of a student, they will create an environment to suit the need of learning so that student will learn more effectively. Teachers will give a lot of suggestions and support through the student's learning process to suit different students. According to Piaget (1953), students actively participate in the construction process of new knowledge and that helps them to learn more effectively and enthusiastically, hence making it more effective as a learning activity rather than forcing students to learn.

The theory of social constructivism is another important theory of constructivism that highlights that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction and in collaboration with others. According to this theory, when people are closely working and learning together, they will learn better. According to Vygotsky (1978), the teaching-learning process is a more dynamic and shared experience. This theory also helps to highlight the importance of collaboration between students and teachers in the teaching and learning process.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

An exploratory case study serves as the research design for this qualitative research strategy. The objective of an exploratory case study is to uncover something novel and intriguing which assists researchers in comprehending the situation in which the data obtained are based on the exploration of selected phenomena and incorporate phenomenological strategy components (Stevens & Wrenn, 2013)). According to Van Manen (2016), phenomenology helps researchers comprehend personal actions and decisions by posing inquiries about meaning.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

Eight participants (see Table 1) were selected purposefully and all of them came from four Malaysian national secondary schools in Kota Bharu, Kelantan state from Pusat Tuisyen Pendidikan Cemerlang (PTPC) and Pusat Tuisyen Akademik Karisma (PTA Karisma). Purposive sampling is a sampling for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest and is based on the relevant required characteristics, knowledge and experiences (Zickar & Keith, 2023). In this study, all eight participants were selected based on willingness to participate and the possession of the following criteria also a total of eight teachers participated, recruited through official school invitations and voluntary sign-ups. All of them needed to be trained ESL teachers with a minimum of three years of teaching experience in Malaysian national primary and secondary schools. All participants' actual identities were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Table 1. Participants information

Participants	Pseudonym	Teaching experience	ESL levels taught
Teacher 1	T1	19 years	Secondary
Teacher 2	T2	26 years	Secondary
Teacher 3	T3	5 years	Secondary
Teacher 4	T4	26 years	Primary and Secondary
Teacher 5	T5	3 years	Secondary
Teacher 6	T6	11 years	Primary and secondary
Teacher 7	T7	8 years	Secondary
Teacher 8	T8	15 years	Primary and secondary

The research instruments used in this study were a series of semi-structured interviews followed up by focus group interviews with the participants. Interviews are an efficient method of collecting data for qualitative research and case studies. Furthermore, it is one of the most effective strategies for eliciting spontaneous descriptions of participants' experiences and issues encountered during teaching and learning sessions (Creswell, 2018).

As the information needed in the study also required the personal reflections of the participating teachers on their lessons as well as their perceptions of challenges they had faced, qualitative interviews were used as a method in this study. For this purpose, a semi-structured interview protocol including open-ended and guiding questions was constructed and qualitative interviews were then conducted with each participating teacher. During the interview, participants were prompted to reflect on the lessons that they had conducted, especially focusing on challenges they may have faced. Questions were also asked to establish their perceptions of the level of 21st century skills that had been integrated into the lessons and the level of achievement of those skills that they could observe among their own students. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

During the initial part of the interview, the participants were briefed on the purpose and goal to ensure that they were well informed of the research they were participating in. Participants were first provided with a soft copy of the informed consent, study details, and a brief explanation about this research to prepare for the interview session. After all individual interviews were completed two focus group interviews were conducted with all the participants with the researcher as moderator. The focus group interview is a qualitative research method where a small, diverse group of people discusses a specific topic under the guidance of a moderator. The researcher created a list of open-ended questions based on the research objectives before the focus group interview. These questions were similar in content to the questions in the semi-structured interviews but had been paraphrased to encourage discussion. The aim of the focus group interviews was to triangulate findings from the semi-structured interviews and to fill any possible gaps in information that may have been missed. All interviews were recorded with the participants' knowledge and permission. The data collected from all the interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to the objectives of the study. The data were grouped according to the emerging themes and were organized to provide answers to the research questions.

3.3. Analyzing the Data

The data sources consisted of the responses from the semi-structured individual interviews and the focus group interviews. Thematic analysis was used which is an inductive approach that enables researchers to discover and interpret the patterns, themes, and meaning embedded within the data, which contribute to theory development, evidence-based decision making, and advances in social science knowledge (Fuchs, 2023). After the interviews were completed, all collected data was collated to generate a list of preliminary themes and ideas corresponding with each of the research questions and objectives. Codes were generated, and words or phrases related to the codes were grouped to identify all keywords mentioned by participants. Illustrative examples were taken from specifically identified excerpts from the data. The data was then reread several times to identify more examples that corresponded with each theme, and by this the list of themes was refined. The identified codes were then examined in greater depth for subthemes based on the grouping. All parts of the study were compared before the research questions were answered to confirm and triangulate the findings. Feedback from member checks by the participants was also considered to ensure the credibility of the findings and avoid any discrepancies between the findings and the data.

4. FINDINGS

4.1. Research Question 1

What are the challenges faced by Malaysian ESL teachers while conducting English lessons?

4.2. Main Themes and Sub-Themes

From the data, four major themes were identified in terms of challenges faced by Malaysian ESL teachers while conducting English lessons. According to Table 2, 40.2% of the challenges identified by Malaysian ESL teachers fall under the theme of students' low confidence levels. Under this main theme, the sub-theme of "lack of proficiency in English" had the highest frequency with a percentage of 27.1 % followed by expectations of teachers with 13.1 %. Students' ack of motivation was the theme with the next highest frequency of 38.1 % with subthemes of environment and family background (16.1%). Interest in English/ perspectives and attitudes comprised 13.2% and lack of opportunities to practice English made up 8.8% of the total. The third theme, which reflected more on teachers' personal challenges was titled administrative issues in education. This constituted 14.4 % of the total with the sub-themes of directives (5.9%), curriculum issues (3.6%), exam requirements (3.2%) and teachers' workloads (1.7%). The final theme that stood out and which had been mentioned several times was clustered under the heading of resources and support. This comprised the remaining 7.3% of the data and was almost equally divided between lack of reading resources (3.9%) and lack of IT support (3.4%).

Table 2. Classification of themes and sub-themes of question 1

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency of sub-themes	Sub-themes %	Frequency of themes	Themes %
Low confidence level	Lack of proficiency in English	43	27.1%	64	40.2%
	Expectations of teachers	21	13.1%		
Lack of motivation	Environment / family background	26	16.1%	61	38.1%
	Interest in English/ perspectives and attitudes	21	13.2%		
	Lack of opportunities to practice English	14	8.8%		
Administrative issues	Directives by administrators	9	5.9%	23	14.4%
	Curriculum issues	6	3.6%		
	Exam requirements	5	3.2%		
	Teachers' workload	3	1.7%		
Resources and support	Lack of reading resources	6	3.9%	12	7.3%
	Lack of IT support	5	3.4%		
Total		160	100%	160	100%

4.3. Low Confidence Level of Students

According to seven out of eight participants, students' lack of confidence is the main challenge during teaching and learning activities. This lack of confidence was largely related to students' fear of making mistakes or being embarrassed and laughed at by their classmates if they made language errors in their speech. This made many of them hesitant to express themselves in the English language and even to voice out their opinions or ideas if they had some. Participants also admitted that there could have been instances when students had been scolded or felt humiliated by certain ESL teachers for their weak language proficiency. This made them even more reluctant to interact in the ESL classroom.

> It's like when you get the students to speak right, they don't want to speak because they're scared, they might get it wrong but once they start like, hey it's not that bad, you notice younger students are not scared of making mistakes, but for the older ones if you are corrected in front of your friends, they'll be shy and then they refuse to speak further (T1).

Five participants agreed that students' poor proficiency levels are one of the main challenges they face. They concurred that students' English competency levels were not what they were expected to be and this caused

significant challenges. However, nearly all participants acknowledged that their initial expectations may have been unrealistic as they were based on standardized requirements rather than the actual competencies of the students.

Thus, when students fail to achieve the required competencies, it ends up as frustrating situations both for the student as well as for the teacher.

> Sometimes it's sad watching them try so hard and yet not being able to achieve the needed competency level. I think maybe the fault is with us rather than them. Maybe we need to redefine our desired competency levels based on their ability, not on what has been set by the Ministry (T3).

Another factor that was highlighted under the sub-theme of teachers' expectations was the tendency among many teachers to keep picking up the students who are willing to participate and talk and leaving out others who were not so confident. This also pointed towards teachers being part of the problem rather than the solution and this was even more evident in cases when the feedback given by teachers on their students' language performance tended to be negative or non-constructive rather than supportive. Here is an excerpt from one of the participants, *in the end, it's the same ones who build more confidence and the others keep getting left behind. It's not good I know but sometimes we forget to call on the quiet ones and focus only on the active or more vocal ones (T4)."* Another participant added, *" Perhaps it is us who make the problem worse. We keep rewarding the ones who perform and forget about the ones who may want to try but are afraid of making mistakes (T5)".*

4.4. Lack of Motivation

The students' lack of motivation was another chief challenge stated by all eight of the participants and this was also closely tied with their own lack of confidence which stemmed significantly from their lack of proficiency. The lack of proficiency made them lose confidence and this subsequently made the students lose motivation in the English language lessons.

> It takes a lot of effort just to motivate them to speak in English. I need to encourage them to use the right words. Tell them it's ok to make mistakes. Sometimes I think they have become so demotivated due to repeated failures to live up to expectations that they refuse to try anymore (T7).

Students' family environments were also another chief reason for the lack of motivation faced by the teachers.

> It's difficult to try to convince them that it is important to learn English when all around them in their homes it is never taken seriously. The only English exposure they get is in the classroom. After that everything reverts to their home language. So, there is simply no other motivation apart from the classroom (T3).

The main thing is their attitudes towards English language. Where they come from, it is not taken seriously. Sometimes they are even made fun of if they try to speak in English in their village. They don't want to be seen as show-offs. Therefore, in the end, there is no one else to practice the language with. This is a real challenge.

4.5. Research Question 2

The extent to which the activities conducted in the ESL classroom helps students to enhance creativity, critical thinking, collaborative skills and communication skills?

4.6. Incorporation of 21st Century Skills in the ESL Classroom

When questioned about how teachers infused 21st century skills into their ESL lessons, Table 3 presents the major themes that surfaced were collaboration (49%) followed by critical thinking (23%) and communication skills (17%). In general, creativity did not rank as highly as the other three skills (10%) that were discussed.

Themes	Sub-themes	Frequency of sub-themes	Sub-themes %	Frequency of themes	Themes %
Collaboration	Teamwork	12	22%		
	Group projects	10	19%	26	49%
	Peer evaluations	4	8%		
Critical thinking	Analyzing	6	12%		
	Brainstorming	4	7%	12	23%
	Questioning	2	4%		
Communication	Interpersonal	7	12%		
	Written	3	5%	10	17%
Creativity	Role play	4	7%	6	11%
	New ideas	2	4%		
Total		54	100%	54	100%

4.7. Collaboration

Among the chief reasons for the significant presence of collaborative skills in most of the responses was the fact that the ESL teachers had already set the stage or provided the framework for collaboration through group work by the activities that had been designed in the ESL classroom. *"We have group projects and some of them are graded so whether they like it or not the students will have to collaborate. After all their marks are at stake (T1).* However, the question of whether this was done as a choice or forced upon the students was also apparent during the interviews. *I am not sure if they would do it willingly on their own or they collaborate just because they are forced into groups (T3)."*

Another question that was frequently thought aloud by the participants was whether the placing of students into groups an artificial method of collaboration was just and if the collaboration was more "real" and out of the students' personal choice.

I am not sure even in the groups, I can see not all are contributing. So, I am not sure whether they are really learning the 21ˢᵗ century skills or just making a show of it (T4).

According to participant T3, students will learn how to complete their work as a team, especially when they need to do their work on the whiteboard through collaboration among peers. Another participant mentioned that collaboration also helped new students to assimilate with the other students, make new friends and familiarize them with classroom routines.

> *I have seen my students really become good at collaborating through group work. They learn how to support each other. They interact and even sometimes provide constructive criticism. In group projects, they eventually manage to produce really good outcomes with each one participating. So, I must say that their collaboration skills are very clear (T6).*

4.8. Critical Thinking

The presence of critical thinking in the ESL classroom was confirmed by each one of the participants although most of them attributed it to being part of the syllabus.

> *The new syllabus already has these HOTS questions. We cannot run away from critical thinking in the classroom (observation, analysis and problem-solving). It all involves critical thinking (T5).*

But whether the students were able to get involved in critical thinking independently and more importantly, develop critical thinking skills apart from the prescribed content or syllabus was still unclear for most participants.

> *I do see it happening. Not immediately but after at least one term. Initially, like for example, when I ask them a question the answer will always be the expected one the prescribed answers, but I will ask them to think deeper and think more. I will always ask why. Why did you answer this way? What else could have happened? What if this had not happened? Now I see them questioning each other when they do their group projects. Why are you doing it this way? Sometimes it is quite funny (T3).*

The activities that the participants have included in their ESL classrooms also point towards a significant integration of critical thinking. Activities like talk it out, elevator pitch, total recall crazy options were mentioned by five participants and phrases like logical reasoning and Socratic questioning were also mentioned frequently.

4.9. Communication Skills

When the questions were based on communication skills, almost all of the participants (6/8) confirmed that their ESL classrooms by default lent themselves to activities that required communication between the students and the teacher. However, they also said that there was often an imbalance in communication where most times those who communicated more verbally were also those with higher levels of proficiency in English and also those with higher confidence. The students' backgrounds played a major role in communication levels with those coming from families who understood or spoke English being able to display more communication skills compared to the others. Teachers spoke about the strategies they used to encourage their students to communicate with each other and although at times many of their attempts seemed stilted or scripted it was nevertheless an attempt to speak.

4.10. Creativity

Seven participants mentioned that creativity was a big part of their ESL classroom and that they made efforts to inject creativity into their lessons. Many times, this was done out of necessity just to keep students interested in the lesson. For instance, teacher 1 said

Sometimes, I even surprise myself, the things I do in the classroom just to get the message across. I feel like a performer. Other times, I really need to rely on technology, and I make use of it the best way I can. So, I guess I need to think of new things, new ways all the time. But it keeps my mind active, so I feel like I am learning alongside my students (T1).

"I just research fun activities, and I design it myself. For example, I created this spelling game for my first class based on this series called squid game, a Korean drama (T5).

Almost every participating teacher attested to being creative in their classroom, the question of whether their students displayed a level of creative skills was still uncertain and most responses were hesitant. Some of them do.

Some students are very creative. I am constantly surprised by the way they come up with ideas that are so new and really creative. But then there are the rest who end up giving the same stock answers or responses or worse still not even attempt at all. So, I am not sure whether what we are doing in the classroom is really working. Maybe for some, yes, for some, no (T2).

Three participants mentioned that lack of reading makes students become less creative, students most of the time copying verbatim what the teachers say and don't attempt anything new.

I think my students' proficiency level in English is lacking in creativity and sentence structure. I think because they don't really read a lot, I mean they don't have a lot of reading materials in English. So, their reading and sentence structures are basically all over the place (T8).

5. DISCUSSION

This study examines the challenges that ESL teachers in Malaysian secondary schools' face especially in the 21st-century classroom with particular emphasis on how it is impacting the 21st-century learning of their students for better acquisition of competency in the English language. The findings reported that the main challenges faced by students are low confidence levels and lack of knowledge in the English language which ultimately affects their motivation to learn the language although they are trapped in a vicious circle of not being able to improve their competency levels. The challenges faced by ESL teachers also are unsupportive family and an environmental backgrounds which negatively influence their attitudes towards the English language as it is perceived as a

language of the "foreign devil" and is associated with non-patriotism and disrespect of a nation's heritage and culture as well as materials in English are unsuitable and uninteresting. The materials for students in the English language classroom were not just proficiency but also interest and relevancy appropriate. However, although the English language resources are abundant, teachers are hindered by failure of the school administrators in having realistic expectations of teachers, innumerable work overload given to school teachers that are not related to their teaching duties, such as moral work, parent- teacher association) activities, Uniformed Volunteer Personnel Corps (UVPC), School Co-curriculum Committee (SCC), parent-teacher meetings and unnecessary workload caused by syllabi that are unsuitable for improving the students' actual competency level. These findings parallel previous studies conducted by Saleh (2019) who highlighted that ESL teachers are still affected by examination-based teaching and learning which could demotivate and hinder students from actually being interested in learning the language as well as students' inability to express themselves in the English language due to the influence of Krashen (1982) which highlights the role of affective factor in language learning. Elements of 21st-century learning which is defined by communication, collaboration and critical thinking can be still found practiced in many ESL classrooms, although reduced frequency, especially through group work and projects, and through creative teaching methods adopted by teachers despite all of these challenges. This is in great alignment with the literature (Dass et al., 2021; Kiang & Yunus, 2021) highlighting the need for developing more innovative student-centred pedagogies. Moreover, some of the resistance by teachers to adopt the use of ESL pedagogy, incorporating digital tools and e-learning through the use of gadgets and other electronic devices are also highlighted by the studies of Yen and Mohamad (2021) which essentially capture the shift towards a digitalized way of learning. However, the challenges of online teaching to EFL students, such as Internet connectivity, cyberbullying issues, and the working conditions of teachers demand their utmost consideration despite the momentum of digital learning (Idriki & Tan, 2022; Walker, 2016). Overall, the success of incorporating 21st-century skills are still evident but the challenges of adapting to the changing times are still very much a reality for ESL teachers, and hence, more investment needs to be made in teacher professional development and support.

6. CONCLUSION

In light of the study's findings regarding the challenges faced by ESL teachers in Malaysian secondary skills with special focus on 21st century skills, more research should be done on the methods teachers use to foster a positive learning environment and give students the resources they need to become more proficient language learners. Gaining an understanding of the subtleties of these approaches can aid in the development of more focused interventions and tools to help teachers deal with the issues that have been discovered. The research also highlights the criticality of incorporating 21st-century teaching and learning competencies to meet the changing demands of students in the contemporary educational environment. It emphasizes the importance of communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity in preparing students for future professional success. Teachers have the ability to enable students to develop into autonomous learners and analytical thinkers who are equipped to navigate the intricacies of the contemporary global landscape through the adoption of a student-centered approach to instruction and the cultivation of these competencies.

Further investigation could be conducted in the future, especially considering the emphasis on cooperation among teachers, parents, and students in addressing language acquisition challenges. It would be beneficial to look into how various parties can collaborate more successfully to support language acquisition, especially in situations when students could have extra difficulties because of their backgrounds. The study also emphasizes how critical it is to integrate teaching and learning strategies for the twenty-first century into classroom operations. Subsequent studies may concentrate on assessing the effects of particular instructional strategies and tactics meant to encourage students' creativity, critical thinking, teamwork, and communication abilities. Longitudinal studies may be used to evaluate the long-term impacts of these strategies on student outcomes. Subsequent studies could examine these

strategies' effectiveness in greater detail and look into ways to incorporate them into the frameworks of the curricula already in place. Future studies could also examine how well-suited certain technological platforms and tools are for assisting language learning as well as the best ways to integrate them into language education.

6.1. Recommendations

Teachers should focus on providing a supportive environment and tools to help students acquire the language quicker and develop more authentic English language proficiency to address these challenges. Teachers, parents, and students must work together to address these issues by creating engaging activities that cater to diverse students' needs. They should also be aware of their students' progress levels, conduct periodic tests to assess their understanding, and communicate effectively. Teachers should identify their strengths and weaknesses and provide opportunities for students to acknowledge their abilities. Teachers can help students become more independent and successful in their learning journey.

6.2. Limitations

This study has certain limitations that should be considered despite its contributions. First, the findings might not be as applicable to a larger group of teachers and educational settings due to the small sample size of eight teachers from a pool of four different secondary schools. Furthermore, the findings may not be applicable to other regions that may have distinct cultural, social, and educational circumstances. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the study's conclusions have effects on school administration, policy formation, future research avenues, and instructional practices. First, teachers can improve students' language learning experiences by using the knowledge gathered from this study to create specialized ways to solve issues with teaching English language skills, such as low proficiency and low confidence levels. The study's conclusions can also be used by educational administrators and policymakers to guide the creation of programs and policies that will enhance English language instruction in comparable settings. Examples of these programs and initiatives include funding for creative teaching methods and the implementation of professional development for teachers. Furthermore, the study establishes the framework for future investigations into the efficacy of particular teaching strategies, interventions, or educational technology in enhancing students' English language competency, hence directing future research activities. Finally, school administrators should use the study's results to empower and support teachers in putting into practice successful teaching techniques and building encouraging classroom settings, which will promote a continuous improvement in culture instruction.

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