

Lecturer Beliefs and Pedagogy: A Correlational Study of Poetry Instruction in Malaysian TESL Programs

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian English Language Curriculum emphasizes the acquisition of essential language skills, including effective communication, critical thinking, and literary appreciation, particularly in the domain of poetry. Despite these objectives, poetry is frequently perceived as a challenging genre for second language learners, a perception further exacerbated by an exam-driven education system and teacher-centered instructional approaches that inhibit independent interpretation and creativity. This study explores the intersection of teaching strategies and lecturer beliefs within a Bachelor of Education in Teaching English as a Second Language (B.Ed TESL) program, particularly in relation to poetry instruction. The research aims to identify effective pedagogical approaches that engage students with poetry in a meaningful manner, fostering not only examination success but also a deeper, more personal connection with the texts. Through a comprehensive literature review and quantitative analysis involving 361 TESL students, the study uncovers significant barriers to poetry comprehension, including complex language, unfamiliar vocabulary, and cultural distance. The findings underscore the necessity for student-centered teaching methods that align with 21st-century learning objectives, offering new insights into how poetry can be taught to enhance creativity, critical thinking, and emotional engagement. The results hold broader implications for TESL education in Malaysia, suggesting that a transition towards more inclusive, diverse, and learner-centered practices can improve students' receptiveness to poetry and overall language acquisition.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated effective pedagogical approaches for engaging TESL students with poetry, aiming for both examination success and deeper personal connections. Through a literature review and analysis of 361 TESL students, it identifies significant barriers to comprehension. Findings highlight the need for student-centered methods aligned with 21st-century learning objectives, enhancing creativity, critical thinking, and emotional engagement in TESL education in Malaysia.

1. Introduction

The primary objective of the Malaysian English Language Curriculum, as delineated by the [Kaur and Mahmor \(2014\)](#), is to ensure that students acquire essential language skills for effective communication, both orally and in writing. The curriculum emphasizes several competencies, including the ability to articulate thoughts and emotions clearly, engage with and respond to diverse texts, produce well-structured written work, and appreciate literature, including poetry. Despite the curriculum's focus on literature as a vehicle for language learning, poetry presents particular challenges for second language learners ([Muiruri et al., 2016](#); [Patel & Laud, 2015](#); [Naylor, 2013](#)). This challenge is especially pronounced among beginner-level learners, who often perceive poetry as inaccessible and complex. Teaching methods employed by educators, which are frequently formulaic and driven by examination requirements, exacerbate these difficulties, leading to disengagement and fostering negative perceptions of poetry.

A recurring issue in the literature is the discomfort many educators experience when teaching poetry, a genre they themselves may find challenging to interpret ([Dirgeyasa, 2017](#)). This discomfort often results in a more teacher-centered approach within Malaysian classrooms [Kaur and Mahmor \(2014\)](#), where educators dominate discussions and present their interpretations as authoritative. Consequently, students passively accept these interpretations, which diminishes opportunities for independent exploration of poetic texts. As a result, the study of poetry becomes an exercise in rote memorization, with students fixating on reproducing the 'correct' interpretations for assessments rather than engaging with the text in a substantive, personal manner. This examination-oriented mentality is particularly prevalent in Malaysia, where the pressure to attain high grades frequently supersedes the pursuit of meaningful learning ([Xerri, 2016](#)).

The traditional, teacher-centered approach not only constrains student engagement but also adversely affects their overall perception of poetry. [Xerri \(2016\)](#) contends that an assessment-driven culture can diminish students' enthusiasm for poetry long after formal education concludes. Many students report feelings of anxiety and disinterest, which are not attributable to an inherent aversion to poetry but rather result from a lack of familiarity with the language and the pressure to perform well in examinations. The complex language often found in poetry, particularly in a second language, introduces an additional layer of difficulty, rendering poetry seemingly irrelevant and challenging to relate to ([Patel & Laud, 2015](#)). Furthermore, the limited pedagogical strategies employed by educators frequently emphasize a singular 'correct' interpretation that aligns with examination rubrics, which suppresses creativity and discourages diverse, student-centered analyses informed by personal and cultural contexts.

In the Malaysian context, the challenges associated with literature instruction are exacerbated by an exam-centric education system. As [Patel and Laud \(2015\)](#) and [Xerri \(2016\)](#) argue, this system frequently endorses a utilitarian approach to literature, with a predominant emphasis on preparing students for examinations. Educators tend to concentrate on instilling specific interpretations of poetry and literary devices that correspond with assessment criteria. Although this method may yield short-term success, it restricts students' opportunities to appreciate poetry as an art form, thereby stifling creativity and critical thinking. For many students, this examination-driven approach results in a diminished enjoyment of and negative attitudes toward both poetry and literature.

Moreover, students' hesitance to engage with poetry is not exclusively attributable to pedagogical strategies; it also reflects broader cultural and linguistic barriers. Many students find themselves unfamiliar with the language and conventions of English poetry, particularly classical texts. The historical and cultural distance between students and the poems they study further impedes comprehension (Naylor, 2013; Dirgeyasa, 2017). In the absence of contextual information, students often struggle to connect with the material, thereby reinforcing the perception of poetry as challenging and irrelevant.

In light of these obstacles, it is imperative to reevaluate current approaches to poetry instruction within Malaysian TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) programs. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) advocates for teaching practices that align with 21st-century learning, with a focus on creativity, critical thinking, and student-centered methodologies. To fulfill these objectives, educators must adopt strategies that not only prepare students for examinations but also promote genuine engagement with poetry. Transitioning toward more student-centered pedagogies could empower learners to interpret poetry through the lens of their own experiences, backgrounds, and linguistic abilities, thereby fostering lifelong learning and independent thinking.

1.1. Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the correlation between teaching strategies and lecturers' beliefs regarding poetry instruction within a Malaysian Bachelor of Education in Teaching English as a Second Language (B.Ed TESL) program. By examining the ways in which instructional approaches are influenced by lecturers' beliefs, this research seeks to identify effective strategies for engaging TESL students with poetry. The findings are expected to have significant implications for TESL educators and students, potentially transforming poetry instruction in Malaysia. Ultimately, this research aspires to contribute to the broader educational objective of developing TESL graduates who are not only proficient language teachers but also confident and effective instructors of poetry. This will ensure that future students experience poetry as a medium for personal expression and intellectual exploration, rather than merely as content to be memorized for examinations.

2. Literature Review

The intersection of teacher and student beliefs in poetry education represents a significant area of research, particularly within the context of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). These beliefs not only shape instructional strategies but also influence students' receptivity to poetry and, consequently, the overall learning experience. A thorough review of the literature indicates that misalignments between teachers' and students' beliefs pose substantial barriers to effective poetry instruction. This analysis critically examines the key issues illuminated in the existing literature, identifies gaps, and suggests avenues for further inquiry.

A major theme in the literature is the impact of educators' beliefs about poetry on their pedagogical methods. Teachers who regard poetry as a valuable tool for enhancing language acquisition and promoting creative expression are more likely to integrate poetry effectively into their curricula. For example, Kaur and Mahmor (2014) that educators who acknowledge poetry's role in fostering critical thinking and cultural understanding create engaging learning environments that encourage personal interpretation. Such teachers utilize student-centered approaches, promoting active exploration of poetic

texts. However, despite educators' enthusiasm, student resistance or anxiety toward poetry often persists, and the literature inadequately addresses the complex nature of student perceptions. These perceptions are frequently shaped by prior negative experiences, exam-related pressures, or misconceptions regarding poetry's role in language learning—factors that remain underexplored in many studies.

Conversely, teachers who prioritize examination outcomes over the literary significance of poetry tend to adopt formulaic teaching strategies that diminish student engagement. [Xerri \(2016\)](#) critiques the exam-oriented nature of poetry instruction, particularly in educational systems such as Malaysia's, where standardized testing dominates the curriculum. In these contexts, poetry is relegated to a mechanical exercise, with teachers focusing on instructing students to decode poems according to predetermined guidelines. This technique constrains the creative and intellectual potential of poetry, discouraging open-ended inquiry and fostering disengagement. As a result, students often perceive poetry as irrelevant and burdensome—an impression that is further reinforced by the disproportionate emphasis on exam preparation. This disinterest is particularly concerning for students with lower language proficiency or limited exposure to literary texts, as they may struggle to relate to the material.

Student anxiety regarding poetry is a recurring theme in educational discourse. Research conducted by [Xerri \(2016\)](#) elucidates how students often perceive poetry as difficult, abstract, and disconnected from their lived experiences—particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, where linguistic challenges exacerbate these perceptions. The instructional choices made by educators can either mitigate or intensify these anxieties. Teacher-centered approaches that emphasize singular, "correct" interpretations of poems frequently result in students feeling constrained, thereby limiting their willingness to engage critically with the text. The literature suggests that this anxiety is not intrinsic to poetry itself but rather stems from pedagogical practices. Nonetheless, further studies are warranted to investigate alternative pedagogical strategies, such as collaborative learning and multimodal engagement, which may alleviate these anxieties and enhance the accessibility of poetry for students.

Cultural relevance emerges as another significant factor influencing the beliefs of both teachers and students regarding poetry. [Kaur and Mahmor \(2014\)](#) argue that the predominance of Western canonical poetry in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programs marginalizes non-Western students, rendering poetry distant and irrelevant to their experiences. In Malaysia, for example, TESL students may struggle to connect with the cultural or historical contexts of English poetry, underscoring the need for curricula that integrate local and regional poetry. The absence of cultural relevance constitutes a significant gap in existing literature, which often presupposes that students should adapt to the dominant literary canon. By failing to account for the cultural diversity present in the classroom, educators risk alienating students and perpetuating negative attitudes toward poetry.

Lastly, the literature lacks comprehensive exploration of the ways in which student beliefs about poetry evolve over time. [Naylor, \(2013\)](#) suggest that with appropriate pedagogical interventions, students' initial anxieties may transform into an appreciation for the value of poetry. However, there is a paucity of research examining the long-term effects of various instructional approaches on students' attitudes toward poetry. Although existing studies have demonstrated the benefits of student-centered learning, further

investigations are necessary to understand how such methods influence students' beliefs about poetry over an extended period.

The tension between teachers' beliefs regarding the educational value of poetry and the institutional pressures they encounter constitutes another critical issue. While educators may recognize the significance of poetry within the curriculum, they often feel constrained by time limitations, standardized testing, and curricular mandates that prioritize grammar and prose comprehension. Dirgeyasa, (2017) critique educational systems that marginalize poetry, arguing that such relegation restricts teachers' capacity to innovate pedagogical practices. This tension underscores the imperative for broader educational reforms that empower teachers to integrate poetry meaningfully into their instruction, unfettered by the constraints imposed by exam-driven curricula.

3. Research Methods

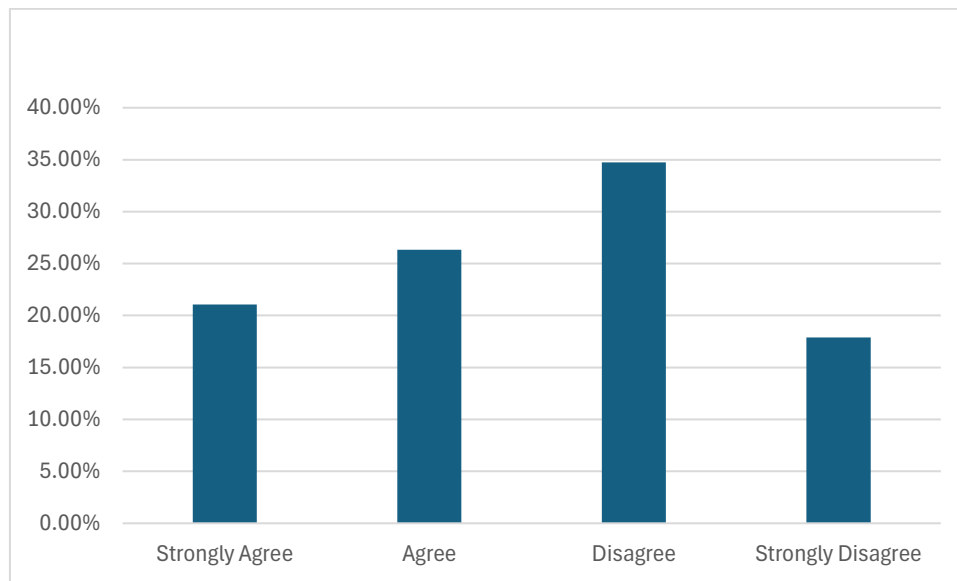
The population size for this study is $N=361$, with a sample size of $S=175$, determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula and their associated sampling method. The Krejcie-Morgan technique, which is widely used in social sciences, simplifies sample size determination by allowing researchers to select sample sizes appropriate for various population sizes without manual calculations. The researcher conducted a quantitative data collection involving all undergraduate Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) students from the Faculty of Education at a public university in Klang Valley. Descriptive analysis then done using SPSS27. This was accomplished utilizing an instrument developed by Tevdovska (2016), which consisted of a 20-item Likert scale. Ethical approval and consent to participate were obtained from respondents in accordance with the guidelines established by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (RECUiTM), ensuring that all procedures involving human participants conformed to the ethical standards set forth by the institutional research committee.

Furthermore, the researcher evaluated the elements within the survey to determine their suitability and appropriateness for investigating the factors contributing to difficulties in reading and comprehending poetry in the English classroom. The findings from Tevdovska (2016) indicated that the survey effectively analyzed participants' opinions regarding their preferred literary genres. Additionally, the survey allowed for an examination of participants' perceptions concerning the factors that contribute to challenges encountered when engaging with literary texts, particularly those written in foreign languages, which may present several obstacles. For instance, the language used in poetic texts may be outdated or archaic, the genre or cultural elements represented in poetry may not resonate with readers, and students may exhibit a reluctance to read assigned literary texts, let alone engage in reading for pleasure.

4. Results

Figure 1 illustrates the preferences of TESL students regarding reading or engaging with literary texts. A majority of participants (34.74%) indicated a response of 'Disagree.' Additionally, 26.32% of participants selected 'Agree,' while 21.05% responded with 'Strongly Agree.' Furthermore, 17.89% of participants expressed 'Strongly Disagree.' These findings collectively indicate that a greater proportion of respondents (55.63%) do not concur with the statement, 'When reading or working with literary texts, I enjoy poems most.'

Figure 1: When reading or working with literary texts, I enjoy poems most.



4.1. Factors Contributing to the Difficulties in Reading and Understanding Poetry Among TESL Students

The researcher developed seven items to examine the factors contributing to the challenges faced by TESL students in reading and comprehending poetry. Additionally, to provide an overall summary of the findings, the researcher will categorize responses into two main groups: those who selected "strongly agree" and "agree" will be classified as "agreeing" with the statement, while those who selected "strongly disagree" and "disagree" will be classified as "not agreeing" with the statement.

The data presented in [Table 1](#), illustrate the factors contributing to difficulties in reading and understanding poetry among TESL students, as well as their preferences for activities in learning poetry. The first construct identifies the factors contributing to difficulties in reading and understanding poetry. A significant majority of students report that poetry involves complex and archaic language (86.17% either agree or strongly agree), unfamiliar vocabulary (82.98% agree or strongly agree), and unfamiliar cultural aspects (92.4% agree or strongly agree). These findings indicate that language barriers, including both lexical and cultural components, are significant obstacles to understanding poetry. Additionally, the prevalence of complex and archaic language is identified as a major hindrance, with 86.17% of participants agreeing that such language complicates comprehension. This supports the findings of [Tevdovska \(2016\)](#) who observed that non-native English speakers often resort to translating poetry into their mother tongue to better grasp its meaning. A lack of vocabulary further exacerbates the issue, complicating students' ability to decipher poetry independently.

Furthermore, 82.98% of participants acknowledged that unfamiliar vocabulary in poetry significantly contributes to their difficulties. According to [Kusairi et al. \(2019\)](#), understanding the emotional connotation of words in poetry is crucial; however, when students encounter unfamiliar vocabulary, they are compelled to make guesses, simplify concepts, or translate into their native language, as noted by [Gönen \(2018\)](#). Moreover, cultural elements such as beliefs, values, and traditions are regarded as another major challenge, with 92.4% of students agreeing that unfamiliar cultural components in poetry

impede their understanding. This aligns with Wang's (2018) argument that a lack of cultural awareness obstructs students' competence in learning poetry, underscoring the need for increased exposure to diverse cultures through literary texts.

Table1: Factors contributing to the difficulties in reading and understanding poetry among TESL students

Construct	Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Factors Contributing to the Difficulties in Reading and Understanding Poetry Among TESL Students	Poetry involves the use of complex and archaic (classic) languages	3.19	10.64	48.94	37.23
	Poetry involves the use of unfamiliar vocabulary.	4.25	12.87	47.87	35.11
	Poetry involves unfamiliar cultural aspects such as beliefs, relationships, values, and traditions.	2.17	5.43	47.83	44.57
	Poetry involves the use of unfamiliar literary devices	3.23	30.11	43.01	23.66
	Poetry involves the portrayals of an unfamiliar theme	2.11	34.74	36.84	26.32
	Poetry involves reference to specific events that require me to make further reading /research on the internet.	1.06	8.51	44.68	45.74
	Poetry requires me to put a lot of effort to decipher and construct the meaning of poetry texts.	2.15	3.23	45.16	49.46
TESL Students' Preference of Activities in Learning Poetry	Prefer to work alone in completing a poetry task	11.58	48.42	17.89	22.11
	Prefer to work in pairs in completing a poetry task.	3.16	15.79	58.95	22.11
	Prefer to work in a small group (maximum of 3) in completing a poetry task	10.53	13.58	51.58	24.21
	Prefer to work in a big group (4-5) in completing a poetry task	17.89	42.11	23.16	16.84

Prefer activities which involve only a written task.	10.53	46.32	29.47	13.68
Prefer activities which involve only presentation	8.42	52.63	25.26	13.68
Prefer activities which involve a combination of written task and presentation	3.16	12.63	35.79	48.42
Prefer activities which involve the use of technology (internet-based task such as 'website, blogs,	3.28	19.57	51.09	26.09
Prefer activities which involve the use of media (picture, video and audio) in learning poetry.	1.08	5.32	47.87	45.74
Prefer activities that involve games (gamification/game-based learning such as Kahoot, Quizizz, Mini Treasure Hunt, Et Cetra) in learning poetry.	4.3	12.9	44.09	36.71
prefer learner-centred activities (students and teachers interact with one another equally, group work is encouraged, and students learn to collaborate and communicate among themselves	1.05	4.21	46.32	46.42
prefer teacher-centred activities (teachers do the talking, students are passive recipients, and during activities, students work alone as collaboration is discouraged	27.56	38.71	24.73	8.6

Additionally, 66.67% of students reported difficulty understanding unfamiliar literary devices, while 63.16% struggled with unfamiliar themes. This highlights a lack of schemata or prior knowledge, which is essential for interpreting poetic texts, as argued by [Kaur and Mahmor \(2014\)](#). Furthermore, 90.42% of students indicated that poetry often refers to specific events, necessitating additional research, while 94.62% acknowledged the significant effort required to decipher the meaning of poems. This effort, combined with the lack of cultural and technical knowledge, creates considerable barriers to poetry comprehension for TESL students.

The second construct examines TESL students' preferences for activities in learning poetry, revealing diverse preferences. A majority of students express a preference for collaborative learning, with 81.06% favoring work in pairs and 75.79% preferring small group activities. Conversely, only 39.68% prefer working independently. Regarding the nature of activities, a substantial proportion (84.21%) favors a combination of written tasks and presentations, while the integration of technology and media is also highly favored, as evidenced by 77.18% preferring internet-based tasks and 93.61% agreeing or strongly agreeing to engage in activities involving multimedia resources. These preferences suggest that incorporating technology and media into poetry learning could enhance student engagement. Furthermore, game-based learning is notably popular, with 80.8% expressing a preference for such activities. Interestingly, 92.74% of students prefer learner-centered activities, indicating a desire for more interactive and collaborative learning environments. In contrast, teacher-centered approaches are less favored, with only 33.33% of students agreeing with this approach. This preference for learner-centered methods aligns with modern educational philosophies, which emphasize active learning and collaboration.

5. Conclusion

The study elucidates the considerable challenges encountered by TESL students in comprehending and engaging with poetry, primarily attributable to the intricate and archaic language, unfamiliar vocabulary, and cultural dissonance prevalent in numerous poetic texts. These challenges are further intensified by exam-driven pedagogical methodologies that prioritize rote memorization and singular interpretations over the cultivation of creative and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the necessity for a more student-centered and inclusive approach to poetry instruction that considers students' linguistic competencies, cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences. By aligning pedagogical strategies with the objectives of 21st-century education—such as fostering creativity, promoting independent learning, and enhancing critical analysis—educators can improve student engagement and render poetry more accessible and meaningful. The findings indicate that the prevailing teacher-centered approach constrains students' capacity to appreciate poetry as a medium of personal expression and intellectual exploration. Consequently, it is imperative for educators to adopt instructional strategies that not only equip students for examinations but also encourage a deeper, more reflective engagement with poetry. Such reforms have the potential to transform poetry instruction within Malaysian TESL programs, assisting students in developing a lasting appreciation for the genre and fostering more effective and confident poetry educators in the future.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (RECUiTM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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