


EMPIRICAL

‘Saya ini original Sabahan’: Applying a contextual approach in teaching English to promote EFL learners’ engagement

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research is to describe the processes involved in applying a contextual approach in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) using Sabahan songs to Year 6 learners in Sabah, Malaysia, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The action plan, enhanced by the input of critical friends, consisted of four steps, namely: i) choosing a favourite Sabahan song, ii) translating the song’s lyrics, iii) correcting the translated lyrics, and iv) practising and performing the song. Data were collected using a multimodal approach, including video-based observations, teaching artefacts, and learners’ written work. The data were analysed narratively to describe the journey undergone by my learners and I, as the English teacher, during the action plan. Throughout the study, it was observed that my learners’ participation level had increased, and my English lessons had become more engaging. I learned how to plan, implement, and evaluate a contextual pedagogy approach to teaching and learning English, ensuring that it was aligned with the curriculum under the new norms of the pandemic era. This study highlights the value of integrating a culturally contextual pedagogical approach into the education system, describing how it can contribute directly to quality education, reduce inequalities and develop partnerships.

Introduction

This study aims to explore the use of a contextual approach in teaching the English language to Year 6 primary school learners, using local folklore songs from Sabah, Malaysia. As the main author, I have chosen action research to describe this process, since it enables teachers' reflective engagement (McNiff, 2017). Burns (2009) indicates that "action research involves taking a self-reflective, critical and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts" (p. 2). Drawing on these aims, this study seeks to address the following research question: How did I develop a contextual pedagogy approach using local songs in teaching Year 6 English as a foreign language (EFL) learners during the COVID-19 pandemic?

To understand the rationale behind this study, the following section provides a discussion of my work context and the particular challenges that I faced in teaching EFL during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) during the COVID-19 pandemic

The English language is the most widely spoken in the world (Pennycook, 2017). In Malaysia, EFL learners are expected to be literate in this language both in writing and speaking skills. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has urged schoolteachers to shift their face-to-face teaching and learning practices to mostly distance teaching and learning in the form of synchronous and asynchronous methods (MOE, 2020). Since most learners in Sabah (where this study was conducted) did not have computers or a reliable internet connection, teachers opted to use simple technologies such as WhatsApp and Telegram applications (Chai *et al.*, 2022; Ching & Zainudin, 2023). By using these applications, teachers were able to communicate with learners and send simple instructions such as distributing homework, undertaking home projects, and

completing online quizzes via Google Forms (Khafaga & Shaalan, 2021).

In my current context, these approaches were not effective, since my learners did not engage with the tasks provided. Therefore, the quality of English language teaching and learning has become a challenge during this unprecedented time (Selvarajan, 2023). During the Movement Control Order (MCO) of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 18, 2020 to March 31, 2021), I experienced many difficulties in conducting distance teaching and learning, notably getting my learners engaged during the lessons. When I instructed my learners to do English language tasks via the WhatsApp application, the majority did not complete them, although the tasks given were simple, such as answering quizzes via Google Forms, writing, and reading using the textbook.

Based on a preliminary investigation, this issue mainly occurred due to the abolishment of the Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR), and as a result, the learners did not see the importance of learning the English subject anymore. Džanić and Pejić (2016) asserted that teaching the English language to young learners is important not only for their second language development but also for their social and cognitive development. Therefore, it is important to plan and create an environment that is related to the learners' context (Chai *et al.*, 2020). One of the ways to create such a constructive environment is by using interesting learning activities during the lesson. Hence, I decided to come up with a classroom strategy to regain my learners' engagement based on a contextual pedagogy approach.

Pedagogical framework

In this study, I employ a pedagogical framework that combines a contextual pedagogy approach, song-based lessons, and behavioural engagement. Figure 1 represents the interplay between these three elements. The contextual pedagogy approach, which takes into account learners' various contexts and the socio-cultural arena in which the learning takes place (Johnson, 2002), is depicted as the

overarching framework that encapsulates the teaching and learning practices.

Positioned within this framework are song-based lessons and behavioural engagement. Song-based lessons denote the teaching method employed, inspired by the principles of the contextual pedagogy approach (Sears, 2002). Behavioural engagement represents the anticipated outcome of these teaching strategies, demonstrating increased learner involvement during the learning process. The overlap between song-based lessons and behavioural engagement signifies the reciprocal relationship between the teaching method and its influence on learners, thus reinforcing the notion that contextually relevant, song-based lessons can significantly promote behavioural engagement.

The contextual pedagogy approach

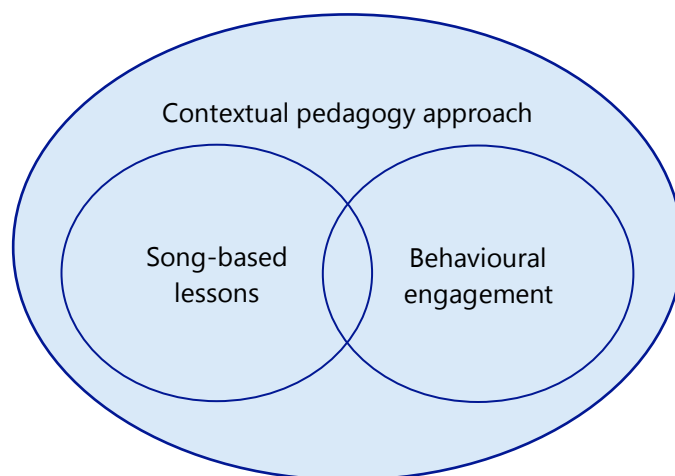
The contextual pedagogy approach is widely used to teach various subjects, including the English language. Experts define the contextual approach as a learning philosophy that emphasises learners' interests and experiences (Johnson, 2002) and a theory of curriculum development that matches learners' previous experiences to create active participation (Sanjaya, 2009).

In contextual teaching, a teacher considers learners' choices and preferences in the selection of teaching techniques, strategies or even materials to be used to teach a particular form of content knowledge or skill (Sears, 2002). Based on these explanations, a contextual approach requires teachers to provide a learning atmosphere for their learners based on the context or a real world scenario. Thus, a contextual pedagogy approach provides opportunities for learners to connect between learning content and past experiences.

Several studies have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of using contextual approaches in teaching the English language. For instance, Satriani *et al.* (2012) evaluated the impact of the Crawford model of contextual teaching (Crawford, 2001) on learners' recount writing skills. In this study, contextual teaching showed positive improvements in the areas of schematic structure, grammar, and graphic features. Moreover, the teaching of English using the contextual approach also increases learners' motivation to actively participate during the lesson, providing a platform for sharing ideas among peers. For instance, Munir and Nur (2018) investigated the effect of a Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach to English learning. In this study, the research participants studied the English language, drawing on their previous experience by asking questions, doing research, and coming up with appropriate solutions

Figure 1

The pedagogical framework of the study



The connection between previous experience with learning activities and learning content improved the learners' English competency. A study conducted by Jubhari *et al.* (2022) found that the implementation of contextual teaching and learning in English lessons was able to improve EFL learners' language abilities as they could be engaged, interact as well as use real-life experience in learning content.

The research studies discussed above illustrate the effectiveness of adapting the contextual approach to English language teaching in different contexts. Not only that, contextual teaching and learning appeal to language learners' needs to think critically and analyse information from different resources and viewpoints (Wasik *et al.*, 2016).

In language teaching, the contextual approach encourages learners to reflect on their own language knowledge and variations to increase their enjoyment of learning something new (Haryanto & Arty, 2019). This is essential, especially for EFL learners to express themselves with precision and confidence when learning a second language. Given the importance of contextual teaching, this study opted to use the contextual approach as a pedagogical strategy to solve the issue of a lack of engagement among learners in English language lessons.

Song-based lessons

Song-based lessons were also applied as part of the action plan to solve the issue that I faced. The integration of song-based lessons into the instructional design significantly aligns with the principles of the contextual pedagogy approach. This approach emphasises the responsiveness of teaching methods to learners' choices and preferences, including the selection of teaching materials used to impart specific subject matter or competencies (Sears, 2002). Given my learners' demonstrated interest in and engagement with music and song-based activities, the study incorporates song-based lessons as a key teaching strategy. This decision is not an isolated one, but forms part of a comprehensive, contextual pedagogy approach that aligns teaching methods with learners' interests and cultural contexts

(Herrington & Oliver, 2000). Consequently, the song-based lessons, underpinned by the principles of contextual pedagogy, create a culturally resonant, engaging, and effective learning environment.

Džanić and Pejić (2016) view song-based lessons as a contextual approach, since the use of songs promotes a comfortable atmosphere for young children. Studies have shown that songs are beneficial and effective in teaching the English language, particularly in the context of second language learning (EFL). Many studies have shown the positive effects of using songs during language lessons (Bokiev *et al.*, 2018; Coyle & Gomez, 2014; Džanić & Pejić, 2016; Ghanbari & Hashemian, 2014; Suciati & Zarkasih, 2021). These studies investigated the effects of using songs to improve English language skills, language components, as well as retention in different contexts. Notably, Ghanbari and Hashemian (2014) explored the use of songs to improve young learners' listening comprehension and pronunciation skills, which also helped to motivate them to learn. Suciati and Zarkasih (2021) also investigated the effects of using English songs to improve learners' listening skills. This study found that elements in songs such as rhythm and tone made the learners feel more comfortable in learning the English language. The findings proved that using songs can have positive impacts on the learners' listening skills, as it catered to different learning styles and the learners became more creative and imaginative in learning a language.

Bokiev *et al.* (2018) investigated the use of music and songs to promote learners' engagement in EFL classrooms. In this study, songs were used extensively in three stages of music activities, which were pre, while and post. The pre stage aimed to activate the learners' background knowledge and boost their interests in learning using songs. The whole stage required the learners to listen to the song attentively while completing certain tasks, such as filling in the gaps and rearranging words to form sentences. Moreover, in the post stage, the learners sang the song with the correct tone and pronunciation. The results of this study show that songs provide teachers and learners with authentic resources and can promote active participation in

EFL classrooms, as they are involved in the three stages of learning using songs, starting from interests' activation until the singing session. Meanwhile, Coyle and Gomez (2014) employed song-based activities to enhance L2 vocabulary knowledge. In this study, preschool children learned the English language using children's songs that they knew already to learn simple vocabulary, as part of their half-hour sessions on consecutive days. Teachers began the song-based activities by teaching about the target vocabulary using visual aids, and then the learners were required to sing the song with gestures. They then sang the song again several times to increase memorisation. Džanić and Pejić (2016) employed an experimental research design to look at the effectiveness of using songs during listening lessons. This study utilised traditional and modern songs to familiarise the learners with new English words. In addition, the research participants in the experimental group used three different songs such as 'If You're Happy', 'I Like Chicken' and 'Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes' in a video format together with lyrics. The research participants in this study used the songs to practise English pronunciation and they also compared the songs with other songs in their own language.

It can be concluded that using songs in language lessons supports children's listening skills and promotes vocabulary mastery. The expectation is that this integrative approach illustrates how each component – contextual pedagogy and song-based lessons – mutually reinforces the other, thereby augmenting the overall teaching and learning experience.

Behavioural engagement

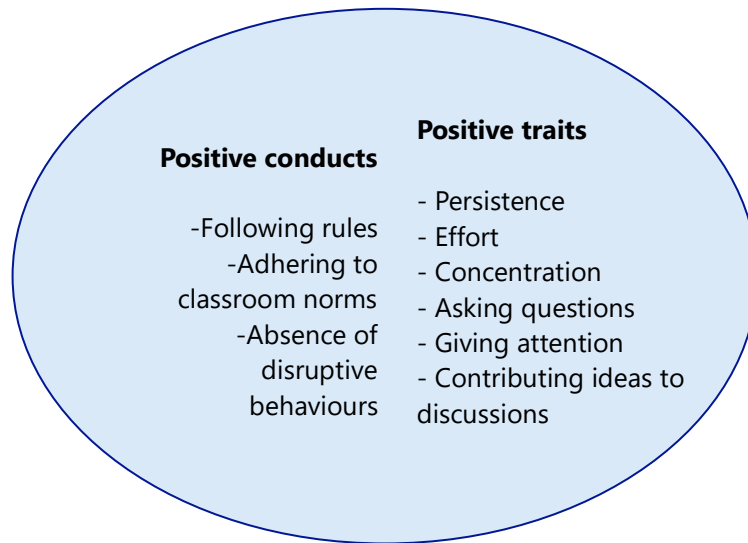
Over many years, researchers and practitioners have studied learners' engagement, with the aim of evaluating the relationship between engagement profiles and performance in teaching and learning activities (Christenson *et al.*, 2012; Christenson & Reschly, 2010). There are many types of learners' engagement and one of them is behavioural engagement. Behavioural engagement draws on the idea of participation: "it includes involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities and

is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out" (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004, p. 60). Fredricks *et al.* (2004) developed a framework to explain different features of learners' underlying academic engagement and how this could positively impact their performance in teaching and learning activities. Originally, the framework consisted of three components of behavioural engagement, which included positive conduct, involvement in learning and academic duties, as well as participation in school activities. However, I have modified the framework to focus on only positive conducts and positive traits, to measure the learners' engagement throughout the action plan. Figure 2 is the behavioural engagement framework used in this study.

There are numerous indicators and ways to measure behavioural engagement in an educational setting. According to Figure 2, two definitions used to explain behavioural engagement in Fredricks *et al.*'s (2004) study include positive conducts and positive traits. Positive conducts relate to learners following rules and classroom norms throughout the teaching and learning activities (Charkhabi *et al.*, 2019). Next, another positive conduct to measure behavioural engagement is the absence of disruptive behaviour. Disruptive behaviour is highly linked to a lack of engagement, as learners feel their learning activities are not useful in their daily lives (Jones & Kessler, 2020).

Besides, the second useful definition for identifying behavioural engagement is by looking at learners' positive traits. These include learners making persistent efforts to complete the tasks given, concentrate, ask questions, pay attention, and contribute ideas in discussions (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; McGowan & Gunderson, 2010). Marks (2000) stated that it is relevant to define behavioural engagement by looking at learners' positive conducts, efforts, and participation in teaching and learning activities. Additionally, Rimm-Kaufman *et al.* (2009) found that learners who developed positive conducts and positive traits had better academic performance and self-regulatory capacities.

Figure 2
Behavioural engagement framework (adapted from Fredricks et al. (2004))



In particular, the study revealed that learners’ self-regulation upon school entry in a direct assessment related to teachers’ report of behavioural self-control, cognitive self-control, and work habits in the spring of the school term.

To sum up, in this pedagogical framework, the integration of a contextual pedagogy approach, song-based lessons, and behavioural engagement serves as the basis for teaching English to Year 6 primary school learners. This framework is not merely an instructional guide; rather, it is deeply interwoven with the action research methodology, a pivotal element of this study. This compatibility permits the continual refinement and adaptation of teaching strategies, with the ultimate aim of bolstering learners’ engagement and addressing the learning outcomes. Thus, as an approach, it is particularly effective in navigating the educational challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

This study employed an action research design, whereby a teacher produces a process of action and becomes a researcher of their personal teaching practices, to facilitate the research process (Burns, 2009). The action research design (qualitative) is similar to the previous study conducted by Solihat *et al.* (2021). In Solihat *et al.*’s study, they focused on

improving English business letter writing skills through the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach.

The action research process also relates to the idea of reflective practice and concerns itself with bringing about changes to current practices (McNiff, 2017). In relation to this, the idea of a teacher becoming a researcher by using reflective practices motivated the teachers in McNiff’s study to opt for an action research design. Similar to McNiff’s context, the action research process in the present study has helped the teacher-researcher to find solutions for the practice-based problems that he faced in language teaching, particularly in second language education. The researcher adapted Burns’s (2009) model of action research in one cycle of action. This model includes four fundamental steps: planning, action, observing and reflecting. This model is often used in second language action research and has proven useful to improve teaching practices according to the essential phases of the action research process.

The planning stage starts with the teacher-researcher beginning to identify problem(s) in his teaching and learning. Barrot *et al.* (2021) assert that EFL teachers must identify their own issues and problems related to instructional methods, namely learners’ lack of engagement with learning the English language via distance learning. The teacher-researcher must then decide to adapt a

contextual approach as an strategy to enhance his/her learners' engagement. During the action phase, the teaching strategy is carefully considered and put into action during face-to-face instruction. In the observation phase, the teacher-researcher observes the effects of the strategy and documents the data needed. Finally, the reflection stage offers the teacher-researcher an opportunity to critically evaluate and describe the effects of the teaching strategy on learners' engagement in learning the English language in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic. To reflect on and evaluate the teaching strategy, I was interested in looking at learners' behavioural engagement. This was important since most learners disengaged during the distance teaching and learning of the Movement Control Order (MCO). Therefore, I adapted Fredricks *et al.*'s (2004) *behavioural engagement framework* to evaluate my learners' engagement throughout the action plan.

The participating learners

For this study, 32 Year 6 learners (13 boys and 19 girls), aged 12 years old, who attended a suburban school in Semporna, Sabah, were chosen to participate. Based on my observations, the learners did not have the opportunity to use the English language in contexts outside of the English lesson period. During the classroom session, the learners enjoyed singing various songs, especially Malay songs in their native language. The learners' language proficiency ranged from low to intermediate levels. Their level of proficiency was based on their past Classroom-based Assessment (CBA). They have received formal English education for 8 years since the age of 5 or 6. The learners studied the English language five days a week, with an allocation of 60 minutes per day.

The teaching strategy

The teaching strategy included choosing a favourite Sabahan song, translating the song lyrics, correcting the translated lyrics, practising singing, and performing the song. These steps mapped onto the English language curriculum, as the learners used

the selected song in various learning activities, including enjoying the song by singing with the correct stress, pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation, listening to the teacher's instructions when completing tasks such as translating and correcting song lyrics, contextualising the song by making connections with their daily lives, and finally coming up with a creative re-writing of the song lyrics in the English language. Table 1 is part of the lesson plan, which includes the teaching strategy for a lesson.

Data collection method

Action research is cyclical in nature and reflection is a key stage in this research design (El-Dib, 2007). Thus, data analysis is integral, and it is also ongoing throughout the action research process. Along with this process, the data were collected via a multimodal approach, using a few instruments, namely video-based observations, teaching artefacts and learners' written work.

The video-based observation was carried out to record classroom practices such as classroom activities, instruction, and learners' engagement. The teacher-researcher then watched and examined the videos that had been recorded throughout the action plan. The most important details of the action plan were written up on an information for the purpose of data collection (Mat Noor *et al.*, 2023).

Teaching artefacts were collected and analysed to showcase the instructional practices throughout the action plan and contributed data towards the research findings. These included the song lyrics in the original language, drafts of translated lyrics, final and corrected song lyrics, grammar notes and song videos. Learners' written work was also collected at the end of the class period. The teacher-researcher examined the learners' written words to evaluate the trends in achievement among the learners, particularly their language abilities. These trends included linguistic errors, percentage of completion and quality of overall work. Next was the description of the data analysis across all the instruments

Table 1*Part of the lesson plan that provides an overview of the teaching strategy*

Subject	English Language
Theme	World of Knowledge
Topic	Land of Glory
Language Skills	Language Arts (Listening, Speaking, Writing and Reading)
Learning Contents (adapted from Year 6 English Language DSKP)	<p>By the end of the 6-year primary schooling, learners will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enjoy and appreciate rhymes, poems and songs. ● Listen and respond appropriately in formal and informal situations for a variety of purposes. ● Demonstrate an understanding of a variety of linear and non-linear texts in the form of print and nonprint materials, using a range of strategies to construct meaning. ● Write and present ideas through a variety of media using appropriate language, form and style. <p>By the end of the lesson, learners will be able to:</p>
Learning Standards (adapted from Year 6 English Language DSKP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enjoy jazz chants, poems and songs through nonverbal responses. ● Sing songs and recite jazz chants and poems with correct stress, pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation. ● Listen, follow, and give instructions. ● Read and understand phrases and sentences from: (a) linear texts and (b) non-linear texts. ● Create texts using a variety of media: non-linear.
Learning Objectives:	<p>By the end of the lesson, learners will be able to:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. i. Enjoy and appreciate a song by singing the song confidently along with correct stress, pronunciation, rhythm, and intonation. ii. Follow instruction in singing the song. iii. Read song lyrics to deduce the meaning of the song used, and iv. Write a non-linear text (song lyrics) with minimum errors.

Data analysis

The data were analysed narratively to describe the journey undergone by the teacher-researcher and his learners throughout the action plan. Narrative analysis encompasses a particular procedure that seeks to find meaning by attempting to elicit implications for a better understanding in a narrative form (Kim, 2015). It uses language to make sense of subjective experience. However,

since experience is more intricate than can be articulated within a language-imposed structure, narrative becomes a figurative language that conveys the complexity of felt meaning more than literal expressions (Toledano & Anderson, 2020). Hence, the narrative expands the meanings of literal language and extends our understanding of an experience by contextualising it (Toledano & Anderson, 2020). This is particularly pertinent in action research, as people's involvement is a central

feature (Reason & Torbert, 2001). Thus, context is not just a situational variable in narratives; it exhibits fluidity (Toledano & Anderson, 2020). In alignment with this, the teacher-researcher performed a textual analysis of the data after they were collected, focusing on the explicit content rather than the broader circumstances (context) in which the data were produced. Narrative analysis focuses on the exploration of language teaching and learning experiences (Barkhuizen *et al.* 2014), and hence was the chosen method to address the research question of this study. As the main author of this article, I used first-person language to reflect the application of narrative inquiry in this study.

Critical friends' group

Throughout this study, I collaborated with a team of teachers and teacher educators – a critical friends group – as part of a professional development programme (see Mat Noor *et al.*, 2020, 2021). This group, which engaged in ongoing dialogue and reflective practice, offered a rich learning environment rooted in the belief that teaching practices and professional growth can be enhanced through constructive dialogue and mutual support (Feldman *et al.*, 2018). Regular online meetings with the group fostered an atmosphere for sharing teaching experiences, strategies, dilemmas, and student work samples. A safe and structured setting was provided where we could challenge each other's assumptions and biases, promoting a deeper exploration of teaching methods and practices (Mat Noor & Ahmad, 2022). The ultimate objective was not only individual performance enhancement but also the establishment of a community that cultivates collective growth, innovative thinking, and transformative educational practices (Swaffield, 2004).

I benefitted immensely from being part of this group. It allowed for the consistent refinement and improvement of my research through the multitude of viewpoints and wealth of combined experiences it presented. My co-authors, the teacher educator in the group, guided my action research by identifying potential issues, defining the research focus, recommending suitable data collection methods, and enhancing the quality of the written article (Shafiee *et al.*, 2025). The group's

critical examination of my work ensured its rigour and validity (Mat Noor & Shafiee, 2021). The supportive environment fostered a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose in our common pursuit of educational excellence. This critical friends group has been vital for the validation of each research step, thus making it an invaluable asset for the study (Kember *et al.*, 1997).

Discussions

The discussion section presents a narrative form to address the research question of the study: how did I develop a contextual pedagogy approach using local songs in teaching Year 6 English as a foreign language learners during the COVID-19 pandemic? It is divided into four phases, based on the action research model employed in this study, namely: planning, acting and observing, and reflecting.

Planning - *Developing a teaching strategy using a contextual pedagogy approach and song-based lessons*

This part discusses the steps taken to develop a contextual approach in teaching the English language to Year 6 EFL learners using Sabahan songs. For the planning process, I started to investigate my learners' interests in learning the English language. I found that the learners favoured using songs during the lesson as the activity was more relaxing and singing was one of their favourite hobbies. Hence, I had the idea of making use of the learners' interests and decisions as part of the teaching and learning activities. Quinn and Owen (2016) support the idea of using learners' voices in decision-making to create a more effective learning environment and to increase classroom engagement. In addition, when the schools reopened, the Ministry of Education (MOE) Malaysia disseminated a document known as the 'Aligned Curriculum' to systematically assist teachers in teaching and learning activity and as an alternative to bridge the learning accessibility gap, which has been caused by the MCO. The document consists of three important parts, which are basic content, additional content, and

complementary content (Ong & Tajuddin, 2021). With the newly aligned curriculum, I planned to integrate language skills into my English language lessons by using a contextual approach that incorporated local Sabahan songs during face-to-face interactions. The strategy consisted of four procedures, namely, i) choosing a song, ii) translating the song lyrics, iii) correcting the translated lyrics, and iv) practising and performing the song.

Acting and observing – Implementing a teaching strategy using a contextual approach and song-based lessons

For the first procedure, through my guidance the learners discussed which song we should use for the lesson. Most of my learners specifically picked Sabahan songs that they had heard and sung before. Murphey (1992) asserts that by giving learners the opportunity to put forward their selection of songs as part of the teaching and learning process, active engagement is promoted. Three songs were selected by my learners at this stage, including ‘Sumandak Sabah’, ‘Original Sabahan’ and ‘Sayang Kinabalu’. I also got them to vote on which one they would like to work with for the class song. The learners decided to choose a song entitled ‘Original Sabahan’ for the lesson (see the full lyrics in Figure 3) by simply raising their hands. This gave the learners the right to engage in shared decision-making, as well as to increase their responsibility in learning the English language. Giving the learners choices to make decisions was a vital way to support their development, as those choices were guided by their personal interests and not by feelings related to self-worth or effort (Schraw *et al.*, 2001). In this context, allowing learners to select the song they wanted to work with enabled them to make choices based on their personal interests and familiarity with the material, rather than a default tendency to opt for less challenging tasks to avoid questioning their abilities (a reflection of self-worth) or to reduce the perceived workload (an effort-related decision).

Next, I wrote the name of the winning song at the top of the board and left it up for as long as

my class was listening to the song. I played the song several times to allow my learners to enjoy its melody and rhythm. Overall, I could observe that most of my learners showed an interest, as they gave their opinions on the types of activities that they liked to do. At this point in time, my learners felt very excited to take part in the teaching and learning activities. However, English teachers must consider certain criteria in selecting appropriate songs to be used in English teaching, notably that the song must be authentic, must fit the learner’s level of proficiency, as well as their interests, and must be widely accepted among them (Džanić & Pejić, 2016). Hence, my learners’ choice of song in this teaching strategy included fun elements and lots of repetition, and they knew how to sing the song in their first language.

After that, they were required to translate the song lyrics into the English language. This task was conducted in groups, and my learners were able to exchange linguistic knowledge, including morphology, syntax, lexis, and pragmatics. Even though translation has played different roles in second language teaching to accommodate learners with diverse proficiency levels, most teachers agree that translation is a powerful tool to help learners to become more confident in understanding English words and expressions (Cullen *et al.*, 2012). Hence, based on their written works, they managed to translate the Malay lyrics into the English language, even though they made mistakes in the linguistic structures. In relation to the morphology aspect of the learners’ written works, they did not consider how the lexical elements of the lyrics have changed in terms of their structure after being translated into English. For instance, the line ‘*Jangan kau tidak percaya saya*’ was translated to ‘*Don’t you no believe me*’, which was grammatically incorrect.

Besides, I could observe that my learners struggled to construct English sentences. This problem could be due to the Malay grammatical structure itself. The word order of Malay sentences does not match the word order of the English language. For instance, the line “*Kau mahu saya siku!*”, which can be directly translated to “*You want*

Figure 3*The full lyrics of 'Original Sabahan'*

Original Sabahan
 Composer: Hezron Rayner
 Lyricist: Hezron Rayner
 Music Arranger: Uyu (Andrew)

*Saya ini original Sabahan
 Mantad kampung Nuntunan Apin-Apin
 Jangan koti kau tidak percaya saya
 Menyesal nanti bila kau dengar ini*

*Odoi sayang kau mahu saya sikut
 Tu Gunung Kinabalu sama sungai Pagalan
 Baru kau mahu percaya
 Dengan kata-kataku saya original*

*Andeh kotoh mimboros oku dusun
 Karati ko po nangku onu ti borosonku
 Nokuro tu kongingis ko do nakorongou
 Dusun mantad Keningau*

*Saya ini original Sabahan
 Mantad Kampung nuntunan Apin-Apin*

*Odoi sayang kau mahu saya sikut
 Tu Gunung Kinabalu sama Sungai Pagalan
 Baru kau mahu percaya
 Dengan kata-kataku saya original*

*Andeh kotoh mimboros oku dusun
 Karati ko po nangku onu ti borosonku
 Nokuro tu kongingis ko do nakorongou
 Dusun mantad Keningau*

*Odoi sayang kau mahu saya sikut
 Tu Gunung Kinabalu sama Sungai Pagalan
 Baru kau mahu percaya
 Dengan kata-kataku saya original*

*Andeh kotoh mimboros oku dusun
 Karati ko po nangku onu ti borosonku
 Nokuro tu kongingis ko do nakorongou
 Dusun mantad Keningau*

me carry”, contains syntactic errors, as the correct sentence should be “*You want me to carry*”. Next, I also identified that my learners had problems with

lexicological aspects of the translated lyrics. They were having a hard time forming words with semantic relations. For example, they did not

manage to find appropriate words in the English language to properly describe the message in the lyrics. For example, the line “*Andai Kotob*” means “*Serve you right*”, but considering the appropriateness of the translated song lyrics, my learners and I chose to use “*You should know*”, as this sentence still transmitted the original message of the song after being translated into English.

The next step involved the process of correcting the translated lyrics, using a dictionary discussion as well as the teacher’s guidance. At this stage, I found that my learners needed to have a linguistic equivalence ability to translate the original lyrics from Kadazan and Malay into the targeted text. They had to take certain elements such as the cultural context and social environment in which the text had been written into account, in order to convey the same messages as in the original language. Hence, my learners learned how to translate the lyrics into English, specifically for the lexical aspect and to ensure correct grammar, correct tense and sentence construction. For example, learners who were at the advanced level gave their opinions on the sentence construction and choice of words to be used in the song lyrics. At this time, the other learners who were at a low to intermediate level of proficiency learned about choice of vocabulary and grammar rules from their advanced friends. The learners managed to develop

their basic linguistic knowledge at this point through the teacher’s guidance and classroom discussion. From my observations, they gradually gained knowledge of the process of changing the sentence structures of the lyrics and were able to modify the meanings of the English lyrics. As a result, we decided to choose the corrected song lyrics for the next activity.

Next, the learners practised singing the song in groups. At first, they listened to an instrumental version of the song and tried to sing the Sabahan song in English. In this session, I identified that most of my learners had some difficulties with their English pronunciation. This is because some English sounds are absent in Malay language. Hence, I guided my learners to pronounce the words and the suprasegmental aspects of the pronunciation in the correct way. To assist my learners in practising the song in English, I also played the English version of the song. The learners could follow the pronunciation of the words in the lyrics in order to improve their listening and speaking skills. After a series of practice sessions, the learners performed the song individually, in pairs and as part of a whole group. During the singing performance, I was impressed by their progress in the activity. The learners creatively added actions and facial expressions to complement the lyrics. Macintyre and McVitty

Figure 4

The translated lyrics of ‘Original Sabahan’

I.....am.....original Sabahan,
I am from Nuntunan, Apin-Apin,
Don’t.... you doubt me,
Or you’ll regret it when you hear..... this,

Oh dear, do you want me to carry,
Both Mountain Kinabalu and Pagalan River,
So then you want to believe, all my words,
I am original,

Serves you right, I’m speaking Dusun now,
Can you understand the words I am saying?
Why are you grinning,
When you hear this,
Dusun comes from Keningau,

(2004) have discussed how the integration of music and movements can successfully create positive results for primary school learners. Zyngier (2007) pointed out that “an engaging pedagogy should include: connecting with learners, ownership of work by learners, responding to learners’ experiences, and empowering learners with the belief that they can make a difference” (p. 344).

Reflecting-Evaluating EFL learners’ engagement during the implementation of the teaching strategy

In the final stage of the study, I applied the behavioural engagement framework adapted from Fredricks *et al.* (2004) to evaluate my learners’ engagement throughout the action plan. I modified the framework to suit the context of my action research study and to generalise the observed phenomena. The reason for this modification was that only certain conducts and traits were observed during the teaching and learning. The first fundamental of behavioural engagement is an entailment of the positive conduct of learners, such as following rules and adhering to classroom norms, as well as the absence of disruptive behaviours. During the implementation of the teaching strategy, the learners managed to follow the protocols, starting from choosing a song and continuing until performing the song in English. Apart from that, they also followed my instructions in completing all the tasks given. In order to achieve the learning outcomes of the lessons, the activities were structured to prepare my learners for a real performance. They systematically participated from the beginning until the end of the lessons, although this action plan took several days to complete. When I instructed them to sit in groups during group activities (as shown in Figure 5, they followed my instruction and adhered to the Standard Operational Procedure (SOP), which has been disclosed by the Ministry of Education. They followed procedures such as maintaining physical distance and wearing masks, even in the classroom setting. Considering the size of my class and the classroom setting, they were able to follow the rules consistently throughout the action plan.

The second fundamental of behavioural engagement is learners’ involvement in learning,

including positive traits such as persistence, effort, concentration, asking questions, giving attention, and contributing to the discussion. Throughout the action plan, the learners portrayed positive behaviours in doing all the activities with their peers. For instance, they made efforts to find the song lyrics as homework. When I introduced the teaching strategy to them, they eagerly speculated on what would happen in the next class. Moreover, some of them managed to print out the lyrics and brought them to the lesson. Next, they paid attention to all my instructions before performing the given tasks. A group discussion also occurred during the action plan. This discussion session involved learners engaging in short, informal discussions, often in response to a particular task during the lesson. A sense of co-operation between the advanced learners and learners with other proficiency levels was observed, as they helped to guide their friends, especially during the process of translating and correcting the song lyrics. For example, they discussed the difficulties in understanding the lesson content, instruction, task, or key concepts together and assured everybody was on the same page as them. They had the chance to validate their ideas in small groups, which helped the shy learners to be more confident in participating during the tasks. This demonstrates the development of independent language learning and communication while doing group activities in the classroom.

Next, this study also highlighted how I improved my pedagogical practice in teaching the English language to suit the new norms imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on my observations, my learners were actively engaged with the teaching and learning activities, as they enjoyed the idea of learning the English language using songs. Shin (2006) highlights that the use of songs is effective as a method to motivate learners, especially when a teacher manages to support the teaching activities using real-life instruction and movement. In this action research study, the teaching of English using a contextual approach by adapting local folklore songs created a favourable environment in my classroom, and the learners were more committed during the classroom

Figure 5*Learners collaboratively working*

activities. Hence, they became more engaged and interested in doing all the tasks given to them. This allowed them to gain further English knowledge, skills, and understanding (Himmele & Himmele, 2011). My lessons, which were based on teaching and learning using songs, became a very stimulating experience for my learners, as the songs provided an appropriate atmosphere for the learning to take place during the lesson and in the classroom. In

addition, songs have the power to create interesting and fun activities that everyone will enjoy.

The learners were more engaged with the teaching and learning in the song-based sessions compared to the previous teaching and learning sessions. The learners loved the elements of repetition in the songs and the need to move when singing individually and as part of a group. These elements are common to all young children, thus

highlighting how songs should play an integral role in English lessons.

Reflections

The sudden global outbreak of COVID-19 has impacted Malaysian teachers, including myself as an English language teacher, in many ways. Throughout the present study, I have learned that adopting a contextual approach, using songs, is an effective strategy for English language lessons, specifically to attract learners' attention as well as to regain learners' engagement. Overall, the results clearly suggest that the use of a contextual approach using songs is beneficial and effective when seeking to increase the quality of English language teaching. The research drew on data obtained from video-based observations, teaching artefacts, and the learners' written work. The learners' learning was conducted by linking the selected song with their real-life contexts, and thus they were able to analyse and make connections.

From an educational standpoint, EFL teachers, especially those who teach young learners, should consider using a contextual approach with their learners during classroom instruction. Given that an increasing body of research is highlighting that a contextual approach is beneficial in language teaching (see Johnson, 2002; Sanjaya, 2009; Sears, 2002), EFL teachers should consider using a contextual approach to increase learners' engagement systematically by analysing their learning interests and considering these interests in planning teaching and learning activities in future English lessons. Considering that learners' voices should be heard in their learning progress, a contextual approach is indeed a way to achieve this.

In future studies of my own practice, I wish to explore the application of the contextual approach in different contexts such as among proficient EFL learners. In addition, this study can also be replicated with other English language educators who want to engage learners with teaching and learning. The application of the contextual approach using songs can also be studied to teach other language skills, as well as other language items such as vocabulary and

grammar. Most importantly, to improve learners' contextual ability, teachers should expose learners to the English language environment, so they can learn the English language meaningfully, through a subconscious process (Araghian & Ghanizadeh, 2021).

Implications and conclusion

The findings of the study demonstrate the effectiveness of a contextual pedagogical approach in teaching English to Year 6 learners, particularly during the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach incorporated culturally resonant Sabahan songs, thus aligning with the learners' interests and shared cultural heritage, which significantly enhanced their engagement and participation in the learning process (Quinn & Owen, 2016). The success of this innovative teaching approach underscores its potential for broader application within the education system. Observations from the study indicate that increased learner engagement and participation could improve educational outcomes (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, its incorporation into a broader curriculum and teacher training programmes could be an effective catalyst for school transformation.

However, the larger-scale adoption of this contextual pedagogical approach necessitates organisational changes. Schools would need to invest in teacher training to ensure educators possess the requisite skills for the effective incorporation of local cultural elements and music into their teaching (Džanić & Pejić, 2016). Additionally, a shift in school policies to encourage creativity and flexibility in teaching methods would be necessary (Cullen *et al.*, 2012). While resistance to change, limited resources, and potential cultural differences between classrooms pose significant challenges, strategic planning, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and phased implementation could help overcome these obstacles (Schraw *et al.*, 2001).

Moreover, the findings of the study align with several of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The application of a

contextual approach in English language teaching contributes directly to Quality Education (SDG 4). This approach enhances the inclusivity and quality of education by tailoring the learning experience to the learners' cultural contexts and interests (Shin, 2006). Furthermore, this approach is highly beneficial for learners who are traditionally underserved by the education system, such as those from marginalised communities or non-native English speakers, thus aligning with the goal of Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10) (Himmele & Himmele, 2011).

The broad implementation of this approach also necessitates partnerships between various stakeholders, including schools, governments, NGOs, and the private sector, thereby aligning with the goal of Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17) (Macintyre & McVitty, 2004). In conclusion, the study offers compelling evidence for the potential of a contextual approach in transforming English language education. It not only could contribute to broader changes in educational practice but could also aid in the attainment of sustainable development. However, further research and robust partnerships are needed to explore and effectively implement this approach in diverse educational contexts (Zyngier, 2007).

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