

Translanguaging and Innovative ESL Pedagogies in Malaysian Classrooms: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: *This systematic literature review examines pedagogical innovations including translanguaging, flipped classroom models, and differentiated instruction within Malaysian primary and secondary ESL classrooms from 2020 to 2024. A comprehensive screening process across Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar yielded 25 empirical studies. Emergent themes suggest that translanguaging significantly boosts cognitive engagement and writing quality, while flipped classrooms and differentiated strategies effectively address grammar learning and mixed-ability needs. Teachers generally perceive code-switching positively, though policy tensions surrounding monolingual norms persist. Despite consistent short-term gains, the literature lacks longitudinal studies, integration of digital translanguaging tools, and extensive learner voice research. The discussion section synthesises theoretical and policy implications, recommending enhancements in teacher training and curriculum design. The conclusion highlights the urgent need for longitudinal and tech-integrated research to further refine innovative ESL pedagogies in multilingual contexts.*

Keywords: Translanguaging, flipped classroom, differentiated instruction, Malaysian ESL classrooms, teacher perceptions, multilingual education

1. Introduction

Malaysia's multilingual educational landscape which is dominated by Bahasa Malaysia, English, and a rich diversity of home languages such as Mandarin, Tamil, Iban, and Kadazan creates unique challenges and opportunities for English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching. The country's linguistic policies have historically oscillated between promoting multilingualism and privileging English for global competitiveness. Notable policy initiatives such as the Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran Sains dan Matematik dalam Bahasa Inggeris (PPSMI), introduced in 2003, and the subsequent Dual Language Programme (DLP), initiated in 2016, highlight these tensions (Gill, 2014; Hashim & Tan, 2021). While PPSMI aimed to strengthen English proficiency through content-based instruction in Science and Mathematics, its eventual rollback reflected sociopolitical pressures to preserve national identity and uphold Bahasa Malaysia. Conversely, the DLP attempts to reintroduce English-medium options in certain schools, further reflecting the policy inconsistency that shapes ESL education in Malaysia.

Amid these tensions, emerging theoretical perspectives particularly translanguaging and other innovative pedagogical approaches challenge rigid monolingual frameworks.

Translanguaging, which views language use as fluid and dynamic rather than compartmentalized, encourages learners to draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning, fostering deeper cognitive engagement and emotional security (García & Wei, 2014). In the Malaysian context, this perspective is particularly relevant given the natural hybridity of everyday communication among students. Complementary approaches such as flipped classrooms and differentiated instruction further respond to the complexities of multilingual classrooms, offering personalised, student-centred pathways to engagement.

Despite theoretical advocacy for these approaches, empirical evidence remains limited, particularly at the primary and lower-secondary levels, where foundational English literacy is crucial. Previous studies tend to focus either on tertiary education or on general attitudes towards English, leaving a gap in understanding how teachers and students operationalise these innovative strategies in real classroom settings. Moreover, little is known about how these pedagogies interact with the sociocultural realities of Malaysian classrooms, where resource limitations, policy constraints, and diverse learner proficiencies coexist.

This systematic literature review (SLR) seeks to address these gaps by synthesising recent empirical research (2020–2024) on innovative ESL pedagogies in Malaysia, with particular attention to translanguaging, flipped classroom approaches, and differentiated instruction. It is guided by four key research questions:

1. What pedagogical innovations have been implemented in Malaysian primary and secondary ESL classrooms?
2. How do teachers and learners perceive these strategies?
3. What learning outcomes and implementation challenges have been reported?
4. What gaps remain for future ESL research in Malaysia?

By critically analysing studies conducted in authentic classroom contexts, this review aims to generate insights that can inform pedagogical frameworks and policy development, ensuring that English language education in Malaysia better aligns with its multilingual educational realities.

2. Literature Review

Recent research underscores translanguaging as a transformative practice that goes beyond mere code-switching. Zaki and Sulaiman (2024) documented how Malaysian primary teachers deliberately alternated between Malay and English to clarify complex grammar rules and abstract vocabulary, allowing students to access content through familiar linguistic structures. Similarly, Yusri et al. (2022) observed that teachers' use of students' home languages builds rapport and reduced anxiety, particularly among low-proficiency learners who felt more secure expressing partial understanding in their first language. These findings confirm García and Wei's (2014) assertion that translanguaging offers not only cognitive scaffolding but also affective support, validating learners' cultural and linguistic identities.

The flipped classroom model has also shown promising results in Malaysian ESL contexts. Zakaria and Yunus (2020), in a quasi-experimental study of rural primary students, reported that pre-class instructional videos improved grammar accuracy and boosted student motivation. Learners appreciated being able to pause and review videos, which reduced their dependence on live classroom explanations and enhanced their preparedness for in-class activities. The flipped approach, by shifting lower-order learning to individual study, created space for

interactive, higher-order tasks during class where teachers could strategically use translanguaging to scaffold comprehension.

Equally significant is differentiated instruction, which addresses the diverse proficiency levels common in Malaysian classrooms. Umar and Aziz (2024) found that tailoring content, activities, and assessments to learners' ability levels improved comprehension and participation for both weaker and stronger students. However, they highlighted that designing differentiated materials significantly increased teachers' workload, raising concerns about sustainability without proper institutional support or professional training.

Beyond individual strategies, studies highlight the importance of teacher agency in orchestrating these innovations. Teh (2023) introduced the concept of teachers as "traversal agents," educators who shift fluidly between roles such as facilitator, mediator, community-builder depending on classroom dynamics. Such agency allows for the organic integration of translanguaging within a community-of-practice framework, where shared learning experiences are co-constructed by teachers and students.

Pronunciation-focused studies add another dimension to this discourse. Nordin and Yunus (2020) found that students with backgrounds in Quranic recitation exhibited stronger prosodic control in English, particularly in stress and intonation patterns. This suggests that local linguistic practices can enrich ESL pedagogy, providing teachers with culturally resonant resources to improve pronunciation and listening skills.

Across these studies, a consistent theme is the policy-practice disconnect. While translanguaging, flipped classrooms, and differentiated instruction yield positive cognitive and affective outcomes, teachers often struggle to reconcile these practices with national policies that favour monolingual English instruction (Hashim & Tan, 2021). This tension underscores the need for a systemic shift in language education policy to accommodate Malaysia's inherently multilingual classroom realities.

3. Methodology

Search Strategy and Data Sources

This review followed a systematic literature review (SLR) protocol guided by PRISMA standards. Searches were conducted in Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, chosen for their comprehensive coverage of education and applied linguistics research. Boolean operators combined keywords such as "Malaysia," "ESL," "EFL," "translanguaging," "flipped classroom," "differentiated instruction," "primary school," and "secondary school." The search focused exclusively on peer-reviewed empirical studies published between January 2020 and May 2024, ensuring the inclusion of contemporary pedagogical trends and responses to post-pandemic shifts in education.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they (1) were empirical in nature, (2) investigated classroom-based practices in Malaysian primary or secondary ESL contexts, (3) focused explicitly on translanguaging, flipped classroom models, or differentiated instruction, and (4) reported on learning outcomes or teacher/learner perceptions. Studies were excluded if they were (1) conceptual or opinion papers, (2) literature reviews, (3) conducted in tertiary or non-Malaysian contexts, or (4) published before 2020. These criteria ensured methodological rigor and direct relevance to the research questions.

Selection of Studies Based on Research Context

The initial search retrieved 145 records. After removing 47 duplicates, 98 unique articles were screened by title and abstract. Fifty-three articles were excluded for being outside the scope (e.g., tertiary-level research or general language attitudes). The remaining 45 full-text articles underwent a detailed evaluation based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria, resulting in 25 studies for final analysis: 10 in primary classrooms, 10 in secondary classrooms, and 5 in combined primary-secondary contexts.

Data Extraction and Analysis

For each study, data were systematically extracted, including author(s), year, research objectives, participant demographics, educational setting, methodological design, pedagogical focus, outcomes, and reported challenges. A thematic content analysis approach was then used to identify patterns, synthesise recurring themes, and highlight gaps. Themes were grouped according to the research questions: pedagogical innovations, teacher and learner perceptions, learning outcomes and obstacles, and future research needs.

Study Selection Process

The entire selection process adhered to PRISMA guidelines and is visually represented in the PRISMA flow diagram. The diagram illustrates the filtering process from the initial 145 records to the 25 final studies, detailing exclusions at each stage.

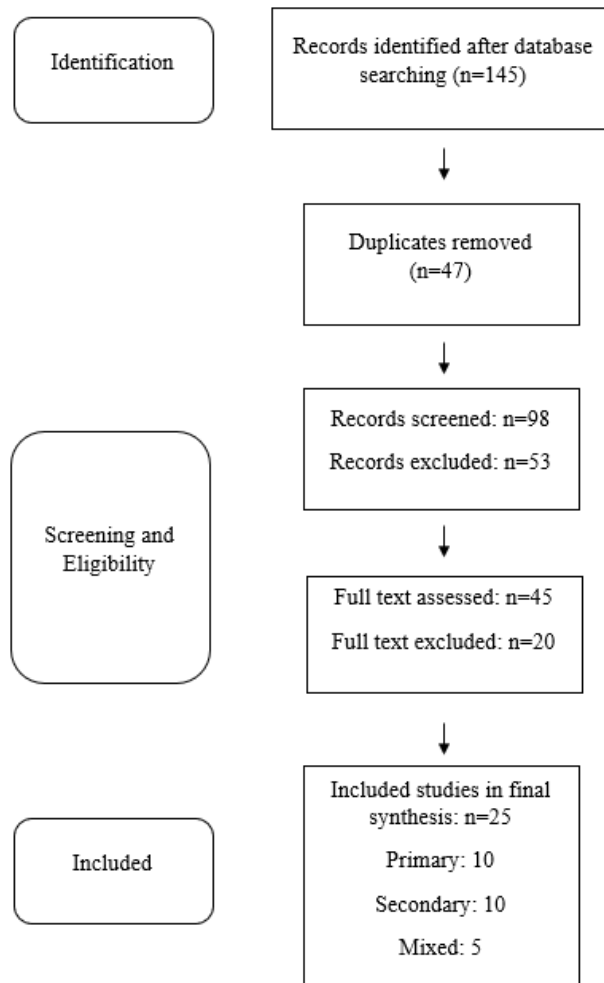


Figure 1: Study Selection Process

4. Results

The reviewed studies collectively reveal that innovative ESL pedagogies particularly translanguaging, flipped classrooms, and differentiated instruction are not isolated strategies but interconnected approaches that mutually reinforce learner engagement and comprehension in multilingual Malaysian classrooms.

Translanguaging consistently emerges as a foundational pedagogical mediation tool, underpinning the success of other strategies. Teachers strategically alternated between English and students' first languages to scaffold complex grammar, clarify new vocabulary, and build learner confidence. Zaki and Sulaiman (2024) found that such language-switching facilitated clearer grammatical explanations, while Yusri et al. (2022) highlighted its affective benefits, noting how acknowledging students' home languages reduced classroom anxiety by validating their linguistic identities. This affective dimension is crucial, as Ramakarsinin et al. (2024) demonstrated that students who first drafted their ideas in Malay produced more coherent and structurally sound English compositions. The use of L1 thus not only supports cognitive processing but also creates a psychologically safe learning environment, motivating students to take risks with English output.

The benefits of flipped classroom approaches appear to complement these translanguaging strategies. Zakaria and Yunus (2020) reported that pre-class videos allowed lower-proficiency students to review content at their own pace, reducing anxiety and enabling them to participate more confidently in subsequent classroom discussions. Importantly, the flipped approach maximized in-class time for interactive tasks, where teachers could deploy translanguaging and differentiated explanations more effectively. In this sense, flipped learning provided the structural space for translanguaging to flourish as a responsive, learner-centred practice.

Differentiated instruction further extends this synergy by tailoring tasks to students' varied proficiency levels, ensuring that both weaker and advanced learners can engage meaningfully. Umar and Aziz (2024) observed improved comprehension across mixed-ability groups when lessons were differentiated by content complexity and task type. However, they also cautioned that such approaches significantly increased teachers' workload, particularly when combined with the demands of multilingual classroom management. Institutional support, such as resource allocation and professional development, was therefore identified as essential for sustaining these practices.

Teacher positionality and agency play a pivotal role in weaving these strategies together. Teh (2023) described teachers as "traversal agents" who dynamically shift roles as facilitator, mediator, or community-builder to integrate translanguaging seamlessly into classroom interaction. This fluidity not only enhances peer collaboration but also fosters a classroom culture where multilingual resources are normalized as legitimate learning tools.

Studies also highlight how local linguistic practices can reinforce ESL learning. Nordin and Yunus (2020) showed that students with Quranic recitation backgrounds exhibited better control over English prosody, suggesting that drawing on existing phonological skills from culturally embedded practices can serve as an additional scaffold.

The evidence points to clear positive learning outcomes: improved writing coherence, enhanced grammar mastery, better pronunciation accuracy, and increased engagement. However, teachers expressed concern over over-reliance on L1, fearing it could limit English

exposure, while policy restrictions and resource constraints continued to limit the systematic implementation of these strategies. Crucially, the lack of longitudinal studies, minimal exploration of technology-integrated translanguaging, and limited inclusion of learner perspectives especially at the primary level represent significant research gaps.

5. Discussion

The synthesis of these findings affirms that multilingual pedagogies work best when integrated rather than implemented in isolation. Translanguaging serves as both the conceptual and practical backbone of such integration, aligning with Sociocultural Theory and Community of Practice frameworks that conceptualise learning as socially mediated and culturally situated (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). By legitimising students' full linguistic repertoires, teachers create communal learning spaces that enhance cognitive engagement and socio-emotional well-being (Zaki & Sulaiman, 2024; Yusri et al., 2022). This inclusive approach is particularly relevant in Malaysian classrooms, where multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception. Flipped classrooms complement translanguaging by providing students with pre-class exposure to content, enabling them to focus on higher-order thinking tasks during class time. Zakaria and Yunus (2020) observed that when students came to class prepared, teachers could use L1 strategically to scaffold complex grammar points and facilitate peer interaction without slowing lesson progression. Similarly, differentiated instruction leverages translanguaging by allowing teachers to adjust the balance of L1 and L2 support according to learners' proficiency levels, as demonstrated by Umar and Aziz (2024).

However, this ideal integration is constrained by persistent policy-practice tensions. Despite mounting evidence supporting translanguaging's efficacy, Malaysian language-in-education policy remains largely monolingual in orientation, privileging English-only instruction in formal settings through initiatives such as PPSMI and the Dual Language Programme (DLP) (Gill, 2014; Hashim & Tan, 2021). Teachers are therefore caught in a paradox: they acknowledge translanguaging as an effective tool for promoting inclusivity and comprehension, yet they often feel compelled to use it discreetly to avoid perceived non-compliance with policy guidelines (Yusri et al., 2022; Zaki & Sulaiman, 2024). This policy-practice gap not only restricts pedagogical innovation but also places emotional and professional strain on teachers, who must constantly negotiate between official expectations and classroom realities (Teh, 2023).

The implications for teacher education are therefore profound. Pre-service and in-service training programs must explicitly equip teachers with theoretical and practical knowledge to integrate translanguaging, flipped learning, and differentiated instruction in mutually reinforcing ways. As Teh (2023) argues, teachers must develop "traversal agency" which is the ability to move fluidly between roles as facilitator, mediator, and community-builder to embed translanguaging authentically into classroom interaction. Training programs should also address workload management and introduce digital pedagogical tools, such as bilingual e-learning resources and automated differentiated tasks, to reduce preparation burdens (Umar & Aziz, 2024). Institutional mechanisms, including resource allocation, reduced class sizes, and policy-level recognition of multilingual strategies, are equally essential to sustain these innovations.

The findings also highlight urgent future research directions. There is a critical need for longitudinal studies to examine whether the immediate gains in writing, grammar, and pronunciation observed in recent studies (Ramakarsinin et al., 2024; Nordin & Yunus, 2020)

translate into sustained language proficiency over time. Researchers should also explore technology-enhanced translanguaging, including bilingual apps, interactive online forums, and AI-assisted scaffolding tools, which could modernise classroom practices and make differentiated learning more feasible in resource-limited schools. Finally, amplifying learner voices particularly at the primary level remains an underexplored but essential avenue. Understanding how students perceive these pedagogies and how they shape motivation, identity, and long-term language development would provide valuable insights for refining both policy and practice.

6. Conclusion

This systematic literature review synthesises evidence from 25 empirical studies from 2020 to 2024, demonstrating that translanguaging, flipped classrooms, and differentiated instruction produce improved learner engagement, better writing coherence, enhanced grammar mastery, and more accurate pronunciation in Malaysian primary and secondary ESL contexts. These strategies not only support cognitive growth but also create inclusive, culturally affirming learning environments. Nevertheless, systemic barriers such as monolingual policy frameworks, limited resources, insufficient teacher training, and scarce longitudinal research impede their broader application. To maximise the benefits of these practices, education stakeholders need to advocate for policy reform that embraces multilingual strategies, integrate translingual and well-supported pedagogies into teacher training curricula, and invest in digital and infrastructural supports. Future research should focus on long-term language development, tech-infused translanguaging, and incorporate the voices of learners themselves to ensure pedagogical approaches remain both effective and culturally responsive.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authenticity

The authors confirm that this manuscript is original, has not been published previously, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. All sources are duly cited and referenced.

Artificial Intelligence Statement

During the drafting process, AI tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT were used only for language improvement and idea refinement. All intellectual contributions, analysis, and literature synthesis were made by the authors. The final manuscript reflects the authors' academic interpretation and critical evaluation of the reviewed studies

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Appendix

Summary of Selected Studies

No.	Author(s) & Year	Focus	Method	Key Findings
1	Abdul & Hashim (2020)	Translanguaging in storytelling	Observational (qualitative)	Increased oral participation and narrative creativity; enhanced learner confidence
2	Adam & Rahman (2024)	Flipped reading comprehension	Quasi-experimental	Improved inferential comprehension and engagement; shy learners participated more
3	Bala & Hussein (2023)	Differentiated oral language games	Action research	Encouraged shy pupils to speak; enhanced classroom interaction
4	Cheong & Idris (2023)	Flipped grammar instruction	Experimental	Significant improvement in grammar accuracy; increased learner motivation
5	Chong & Lim (2021)	Translanguaging for reading comprehension	Qualitative case study	L1 summaries helped better text interpretation and comprehension
6	Farid & Wong (2020)	Translanguaging in debates	Mixed methods	Improved argumentation skills; increased vocabulary use

7	Hamid & Aziz (2021)	Teacher agency in multilingual pedagogy	Qualitative interviews	Teachers adapted roles flexibly to meet learner needs
8	Kamal & Noor (2021)	Translanguaging in science-related ESL learning	Ethnographic study	Simplified technical vocabulary explanations; supported science literacy
9	Lee & Wong (2021)	Translanguaging & peer collaboration	Action research	Enhanced peer problem-solving and group scaffolding
10	Liew & Toh (2021)	Differentiated writing workshops	Qualitative	Improved writing coherence and idea development
11	Ling & Tan (2024)	Flipped vocabulary learning	Quasi-experimental	Better word retention; increased learner motivation
12	Nordin & Yunus (2020)	Phonological bridges (Quranic recitation)	Correlational	Quranic recitation background improved stress and intonation in English
13	Noor, Rahman & Salleh (2023)	Translanguaging & phonics instruction	Observational	Boosted early literacy through Malay-English phonics blending
14	Rahim, Zainal & Ahmad (2023)	Translanguaging through songs	Action research	Improved phonics recognition and pronunciation accuracy
15	Rahman, Ismail & Goh (2023)	Flipped classroom for shy learners	Mixed methods	Increased participation among shy learners; reduced classroom anxiety
16	Ramakarsinin, Jali & Awang (2024)	L1-to-L2 switching in writing	Experimental	Drafting in Malay improved coherence and idea organisation in English essays
17	Rani, Alias & Mohd (2022)	Peer tutoring with translanguaging	Case study	Peer tutors scaffolded understanding using L1; improved vocabulary learning
18	Tan, Yusof & Rahman (2022)	Differentiated vocabulary instruction	Case study	Improved vocabulary retention for weaker learners
19	Teh (2023)	Teacher positionality & traversal agency	Ethnographic study	Teachers shifted roles dynamically, enabling organic translanguaging practices
20	Umar & Aziz (2024)	Differentiated instruction for mixed-ability classes	Case study	Better comprehension for all proficiency levels; teacher workload increased
21	Wong & Lee (2022)	Differentiated project-based learning	Mixed methods	Enhanced critical thinking and collaboration in ESL classrooms
22	Yap & Ahmad (2021)	Teacher beliefs about translanguaging	Survey	Majority of teachers viewed translanguaging positively but felt policy pressure
23	Yusri, Rahim & Salleh (2022)	Translanguaging practices & teacher perceptions	Mixed methods	Reduced learner anxiety; validated students' linguistic identity
24	Zakaria & Yunus (2020)	Flipped grammar instruction	Quasi-experimental	Pre-class videos improved grammar accuracy and learner preparedness
25	Zaki & Sulaiman (2024)	Translanguaging as scaffolding	Classroom observations & interviews	L1 use clarified grammar rules and built student confidence