

TESL Trainee Teachers' Workplace Competencies (Interpersonal Teacher Behaviours) and the Workplace Expectations: A Case Study In A Private University in Selangor, Malaysia

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Abstract: *The study examines the relationship between TESL trainee teachers' interpersonal skills and their readiness for the ESL teaching workplace. Interpersonal skills encompassing of communication, empathy, collaboration, and conflict resolution are critical for effective pedagogy and professional engagement. Guided by the Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour Circumplex Model (Wubbels et al., 2012), which outlines eight behavioural dimensions, the study investigates the manifestation of these behaviours among trainee teachers. The study employs a mixed-methods approach: questionnaires were distributed to secondary students taught by the trainee teachers, English teachers were interviewed, and classroom observations were conducted during practicum. Observational field notes focused on classroom management, student engagement, and collaboration with cooperating teachers. Data triangulations offer a comprehensive account of the trainees' interpersonal competencies and their alignment with workplace expectations. The findings offer valuable insights into the role of interpersonal skills in shaping teacher effectiveness and professional development. This research emphasizes the need for teacher education programs to systematically foster these competencies, ensuring that future TESL educators are well-equipped to meet the dynamic challenges of the ESL teaching environment.*

Keywords: Interpersonal Skills; Interpersonal Teacher Behaviours; TESL Trainee Teachers; Workplace Competencies; TESL Teacher Education

1. Introduction

English plays a crucial role as a global language, particularly in driving economic and technological progress. In Malaysia, initiatives to enhance English proficiency are seen as essential for boosting international competitiveness and attracting foreign investment, which in turn contributes to job creation. This priority was underscored in a 2018 directive from the former Prime Minister, emphasizing English language assessments for civil servants. Nevertheless, a persistent mismatch remains between graduates' English abilities and the expectations of the job market. The 2019 Education First English Proficiency Index (EPI) further affirmed that high English proficiency significantly increases employability in global industries.

Despite these efforts, Malaysia's ranking in the EPI has steadily declined, from 9th place in 2011 to 26th in 2019 (EPI, 2019). In response, the government introduced reforms such as the English Language Education Reform Roadmap 2015–2025, embedded in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025. This initiative aims to improve curriculum design, teaching materials, teacher training, and the implementation of a globally recognized assessment system across all educational levels (Abu Bakar, Esa, Ationg & Jawing, 2021).

While existing research has predominantly centered on employers' perceptions of graduates' English language competency, limited attention has been given to English language educators themselves, particularly those preparing to teach English as a Second Language (TESL). Given the pivotal role English plays in Malaysia's national development and global competitiveness, it is essential to investigate the preparedness of future ESL teachers. To address this gap, the present study examines the workplace competencies of TESL trainee teachers, as evaluated by their practicum mentors and heads of English departments in schools.

In the context of ESL education, professional competence is inherently multidimensional, encompassing more than just linguistic proficiency. Interpersonal skills are critical for TESL educators, as they directly impact classroom dynamics, student engagement, and collaboration with colleagues. Alongside problem-solving, decision-making, and enthusiasm, these are identified as behavioural competencies essential for workplace effectiveness (University of Washington, 2023). Functional competencies, meanwhile, refer to subject-specific expertise and pedagogical knowledge that TESL teachers must demonstrate independently and confidently (Chellappa, 2022). Therefore, understanding and nurturing these competencies during teacher training is crucial to ensuring that TESL graduates are equipped to meet the complex demands of today's ESL classrooms.

Individuals who possess strong interpersonal skills are often perceived as professional, empathetic, and adaptable to diverse social contexts (University of Washington, 2023; Nesaratnam et al., 2020). In Malaysia, research indicates that graduates' struggles in the workplace are not solely due to limited English proficiency but also reflect gaps in interpersonal skills (Azman, 2016). Despite the emphasis placed on these attributes, many graduates continue to show deficiencies in this area (Ab Aziz & Balraj, 2022; Chong, Falahat & Lee, 2020).

In the context of education particularly ESL, teachers play a pivotal role in ensuring students achieve the English proficiency expected by employers. To meet this goal, teachers must themselves possess both strong content knowledge and pedagogical expertise (Ag-Ahmad, Mohamed & Bakar, 2024). These competencies reflect the broader categories of behavioural and functional skills, suggesting that effective ESL instruction requires more than language proficiency; it demands professional dispositions and specialised teaching strategies.

2. The Importance of Interpersonal Skills In The Teaching Profession

Interpersonal skills have become increasingly vital in today's competitive professional landscape, particularly within the education sector. Recognizing the role these skills play in fostering professional effectiveness is essential. Knapp and Daly (2011) emphasize that interpersonal skills are "vital to the development of human relationships" as they facilitate how relationships are initiated, maintained, negotiated, and concluded (p. 484). In educational settings, individuals equipped with strong interpersonal skills are often associated with effective policymaking, resilience, responsiveness to stakeholder needs, leadership qualities,

democratic values, and empathetic engagement with others (Ansari, 2021; Deba et al., 2014; Moroń, 2014). These skills form part of a broader category of soft skills that are crucial for harmonizing social interactions and achieving effective communication (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Manevska et al., 2018; Robles, 2012).

Further reinforcing their importance, Calanca et al. (2019) found that employees who demonstrate well-developed soft skills are more likely to be appreciated and rewarded within their organizations. This underscores the need for educators to cultivate interpersonal competence. Effective interpersonal communicators can engage in meaningful and contextually appropriate interactions (Jaedun et al., 2024; Slof et al., 2016; Utami & Hitipeuw, 2019), contributing to a positive workplace environment and minimizing conflicts (Deba et al., 2014; Miller, 2010). In educational contexts, Collinson (1996) noted that interpersonal skills extend to building strong rapport with students, school communities, and society at large. Similarly, Wubbels et al. (2015) emphasized the role of interpersonal competence in fostering supportive learning environments where students thrive. Such competence allows educators to identify student needs, anticipate problems, and foster constructive student-teacher relationships (Theelen et al., 2019; Wubbels et al., 2012, 2015).

In the teaching profession, the ability to maintain effective interpersonal relationships is essential. Teachers frequently engage with administrators, colleagues, and students which are their primary stakeholders. The Interpersonal Theory (Bruckmüller & Abele, 2013; Horowitz & Strack, 2010; Slof et al., 2016; Wubbels et al., 2012) frames interpersonal competence through two key dimensions: agency and communion. Agency reflects a teacher's authority and independence in classroom management, while communion represents empathetic, friendly, and supportive behaviours. As teacher effectiveness directly impacts student outcomes, interpersonal skills remain central to the profession. Collinson (1996) emphasized that successful school experiences are rooted in meaningful communication. In this sense, "people skills" involve understanding and responding to others across diverse contexts (p. 5).

A growing body of research links teachers' interpersonal skills to improved student engagement and achievement. For instance, Zuhri et al. (2023) demonstrated that English teachers' interpersonal communication significantly impacts their teaching approaches and classroom dynamics. Other studies have similarly concluded that positive interpersonal interactions foster greater student participation and academic success (Hardie et al., 2021; Jaedun et al., 2024; Kiong et al., 2022; Wubbels et al., 2006, 2012). Conversely, teachers who exhibit poor interpersonal behaviour often negatively affect student outcomes (Bhatti et al., 2020; Chamizo-Nieto et al., 2021; Engels et al., 2019, 2021; Wu, 2019; Zhang, 2022). Interpersonal competence is also considered a defining feature of effective language teachers. Karthikeyan et al. (2020) and Ghasemi and Hashemi (2011) describe such teachers as professionals with instructional expertise, language proficiency, classroom management skills, and the ability to inspire students through empathy and enthusiasm. According to Brown (2001) and Nontin and Fauziati (2016), ideal language educators possess a combination of technical knowledge, pedagogical skills, interpersonal strengths, and personal attributes. These teachers motivate students, foster meaningful communication, and serve as positive role models.

Teachers also routinely engage with individuals of various ages, enabling them to refine their feedback mechanisms and emotional regulation strategies. They often exhibit patience, sociability, and humour, which positively impact classroom atmosphere (Albarra Shidiq et al., 2022; Fadli, 2020; Kyriacou, 2009; Lee, 2020; Nontin & Fauziati, 2016; Sunaryo et al., 2020). Collinson (1996) noted that educators working with adults often demonstrate critical

interpersonal attributes such as empathy, open-mindedness, and transparency. These traits align with Bochner and Kelly's (1974) assertion that teachers must be adaptable, collaborative, and able to adjust to varying educational demands.

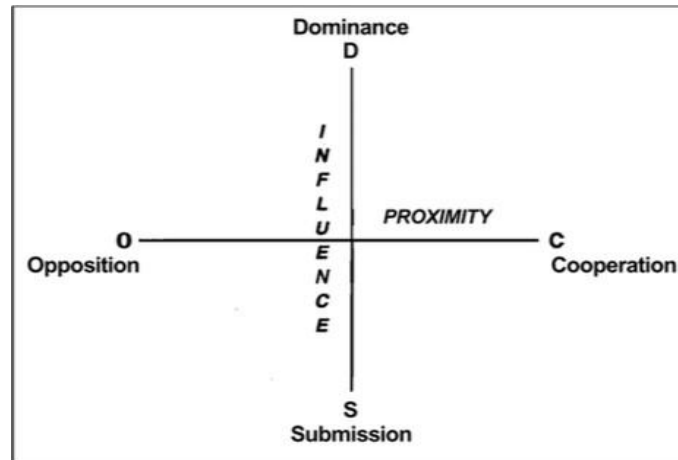


Figure 1: The Leary Model of Communication (Leary, 1957)

One foundational model for analysing interpersonal skills is Leary's (1957) Model of Communication (Figure 1), which introduces two core communication dimensions: dominance–submission and cooperation–opposition (den Brok et al., 2002). These axes explain how individuals assert control and engage in collaborative or adversarial interaction. The model has been instrumental in informing education-specific frameworks, including Fisher et al.'s (1995) Model of Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour (Figure 2).

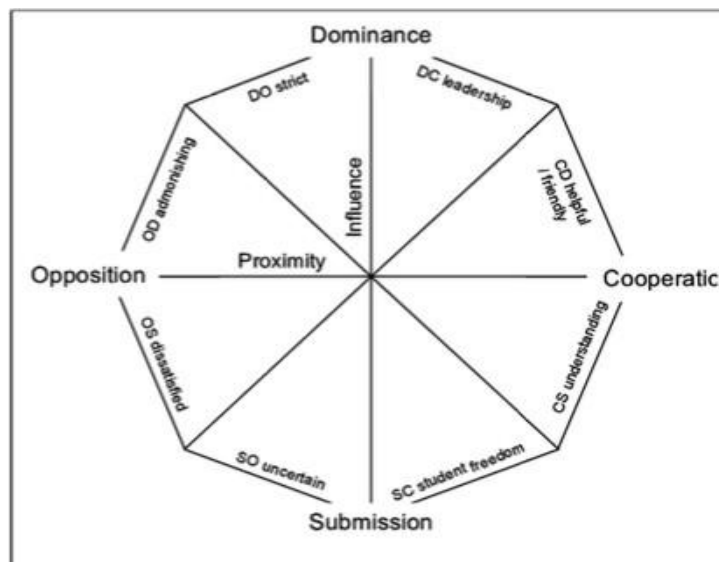


Figure 2: The Model of Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour (Fisher et al., 1995)

This model classifies teacher behaviours into eight categories: Leadership (DC), Helpful/Friendly (CD), Understanding (CS), Student Responsibility/Freedom (SC), Uncertain (CO), Dissatisfied (OS), Admonishing (OD), and Strict (DO) (Lang et al., 2005). To enhance visualization and analytical application, Wubbels et al. (2012) revised the model into a circular format known as the Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour Circumplex Model (Figure 3).

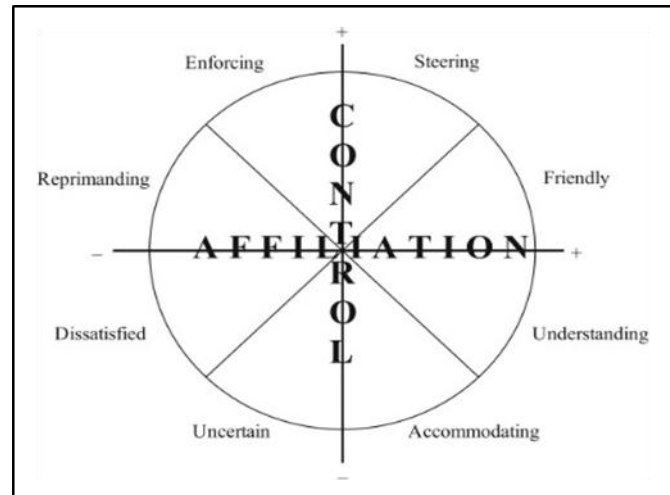


Figure 3: The Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour Circumplex Model (Wubbels et al., 2012)

To assess these behaviours, researchers employ the Questionnaire on Teacher Interaction (QTI) developed by Wubbels et al. (1985) and later translated by Wubbels and Levy (1991). The QTI has been adopted internationally including in Thailand, China, Singapore, and Korea due to its adaptability. It measures the frequency of the eight behaviour types, with higher frequencies indicating greater interpersonal competence. A balanced behavioural profile across the eight sectors signifies ideal interpersonal functioning. This model has been widely applied in evaluating teacher behaviour and designing professional development initiatives (den Brok et al., 2002). Despite the extensive international literature affirming the role of interpersonal skills in education (Derakhshan et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Li et al., 2018; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021), few studies have addressed this issue in the Malaysian context particularly among trainee teachers. Most existing research focuses on educators that are already in-service (Albarra Shidiq et al., 2022; Zuhri et al., 2023), overlooking pre-service teachers in ESL. Notably, Meor et al. (2020) reported that Malaysian undergraduates, while academically competent, often lack soft skills. This may be due to challenges in evaluating these skills and the lack of structured frameworks for their assessment. Additionally, secondary school teachers frequently raise concerns about ESL trainee teachers limited interpersonal abilities, which may hinder school unity.

Given this research gap, it is crucial to explore interpersonal competence among Malaysian ESL trainee teachers. As teachers play a pivotal role in shaping student learning experiences, trainee teachers must develop the interpersonal skills required in the profession. Furthermore, learners should be empowered to provide feedback and articulate their expectations, creating a two-way communication process that helps trainees improve their classroom performance (Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011; Wendt & Courduff, 2018; Zheng, 2021). This study therefore aims to investigate whether TESL trainee teachers possess interpersonal skills that align with the expectations and demands of the teaching profession.

3. Methodology

The mixed-methods approach is particularly advantageous as it combines the depth of qualitative inquiry with the generalizability of quantitative analysis. The integration of both data types enables triangulation, which enhances the validity and richness of the findings (Creswell, 2013). In this study, qualitative data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews with in-service English teachers, while quantitative data were obtained via questionnaires administered to TESL trainee teachers and secondary school students.

Additionally, practicum observations were conducted to assess the actual classroom behaviours and competencies of the trainee teachers. This multi-instrumental strategy supports a concurrent triangulation design, wherein qualitative and quantitative findings are analysed in parallel, integrated, and interpreted holistically to construct a robust understanding of the research problem (Creswell et al., 2003).

The qualitative component of the study entailed thematic analysis of interview data, following coding of themes and interpretation based on emergent patterns and the researcher's reflective judgment. In contrast, the quantitative data were subjected to descriptive statistical analysis, typically involving frequency distributions and percentages to quantify perceptions (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2011). Employing both approaches not only enhances analytical depth but also strengthens the interpretation of results, as "words can be used to add meaning to numbers, and numbers can be used to add precision to words" (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2011, p. 45). Moreover, the interview format allowed for dynamic engagement with participants, enabling probing of significant responses and the elicitation of reflective insights in an open-ended manner.

To deepen the analysis, observations were conducted during the trainee teachers' practicum weeks, offering direct insights into their pedagogical knowledge, classroom communication, and professional demeanour. These observations provided a critical layer of validation, enabling comparison between self-perceptions, external evaluations, and observed behaviour.

In measuring the eight behavioural components of their interpersonal skills, the study adapted and synthesized elements from various established frameworks. These constructs were operationalized in separate surveys: one targeted at in-service English teachers and the other at secondary school students. This instrument design allowed for a more multidimensional and triangulated assessment of trainee teachers' competencies as perceived by various stakeholder groups.

The integration of these four data sources; teacher interviews, trainee questionnaires, student questionnaires, and practicum observations enabled a comprehensive triangulation of data. This methodological choice is consistent with Eisner's (1991) notion of triangulation as "a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility" (p. 110) and helps guard against researcher bias or over-reliance on a single data stream (Bowen, 2009).

Ultimately, the findings from this study are expected to raise awareness among TESL trainee teachers regarding the alignment, or lack thereof, between their perceived competencies and the expectations of the school-based teaching environment. This awareness can inform personal development while also providing feedback to teacher education institutions. The triangulated data offer a strong foundation for evaluating whether TESL trainee teachers are adequately prepared to meet the professional standards required in Malaysian secondary schools.

In the broader context, this case study aims to contribute meaningfully to the enhancement of TESL curriculum development, particularly within the context of Malaysian universities. It is hoped that the insights gained will support programmatic revisions that address current competency gaps, ultimately strengthening the preparation of future English language educators in Malaysia.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Interpersonal Skills of TESL Trainee Teachers

A consistent finding across data sources which consist of English teachers, student questionnaires, and classroom observations was that Friendly Behaviour was the most salient interpersonal trait demonstrated by the trainee teachers. This corresponds to the positive Affiliation and Control quadrants of the Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour Circumplex Model proposed by Wubbels et al. (2012). English teachers also highlighted Steering and Understanding behaviours, placing these among the top three observed interpersonal qualities

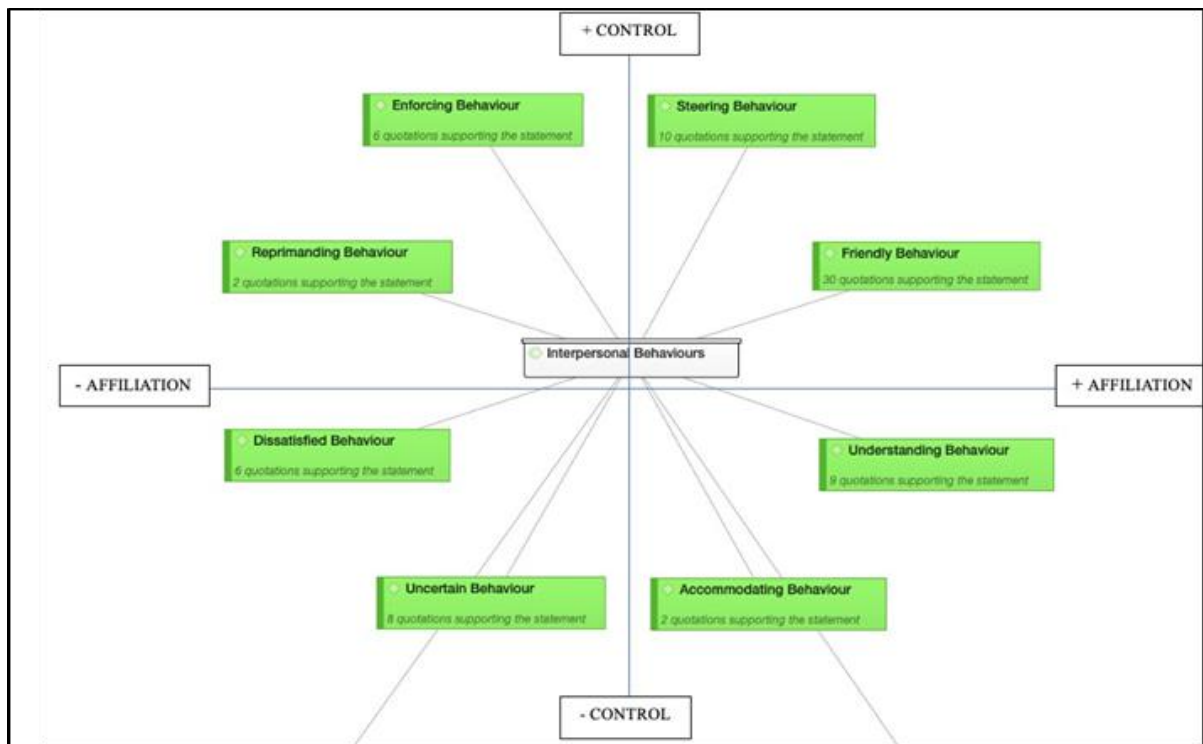


Figure 4: English Teachers' Responses on TESL Trainee Teachers' Interpersonal Skills

Interestingly, student responses gathered via questionnaires mirrored these findings, although with slight variation in ranking. Students identified Steering as the most dominant behaviour, followed by Understanding and then Friendly Behaviour (Figure 5). Observational data further corroborated these impressions, reinforcing that TESL trainees consistently expressed traits aligned with the desirable combination of positive control and affiliation.



Figure 4: Observation of TESL Trainee Teachers' Interpersonal Skills

While these results indicate an encouraging interpersonal behaviour, the high frequency of Friendly Behaviour may have inadvertently influenced lower evaluations in other necessary teacher behaviours, particularly those related to authority and discipline; Reprimanding, Dissatisfied, and Enforcing. Students' close rapport with the trainees may have shaped more favourable perceptions, diminishing their recognition of these more assertive traits.

Moreover, although students perceived the trainees to exhibit strong Steering skills, observational data indicated otherwise, revealing a relative absence of directive classroom management (Figure 6). This contrast may reflect a classroom dynamic in which trainees offered students greater autonomy which perceived positively by learners, yet potentially indicative of insufficient classroom control. This behaviour aligns with the "Tolerant-Authoritative" style described by Wubbels et al. (1993), where a strong emotional bond with students minimizes conflict but may also hinder authoritative classroom management.

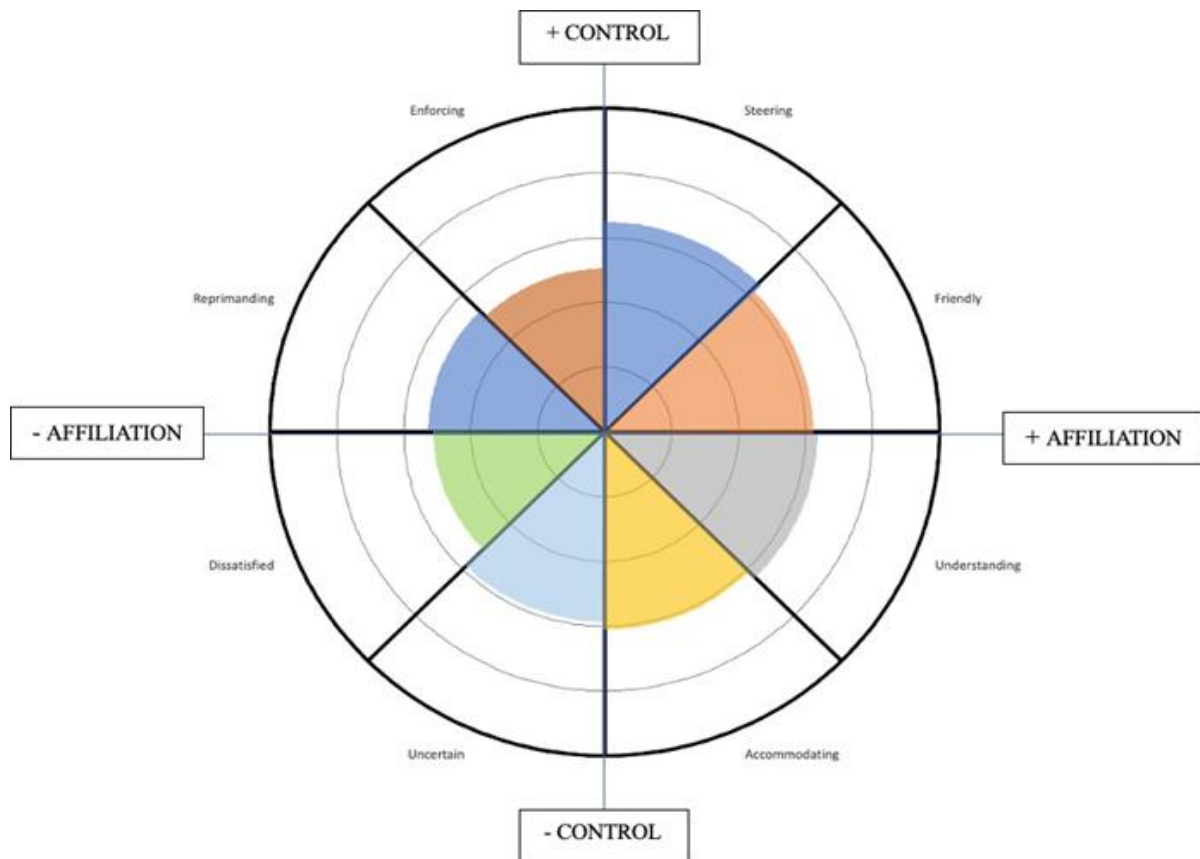


Figure 5: Visual Representation of TESL Trainee Teachers' Interpersonal Teacher Behaviour Circumplex Model

Scholars such as Petřík and Vašašová (2022) and Fisher et al. (2011) argue that friendly and supportive learning environments enhance student autonomy and satisfaction. However, overemphasis on friendliness may inhibit teacher authority, which is critical for maintaining effective learning environments.

A further concern was the elevated level of Uncertain Behaviour, a trait linked to teacher hesitation, low confidence, and perceived disorganisation. Previous studies (e.g., Herbert-Smith, 2023) have shown that uncertainty among teachers can reduce students' academic motivation and weaken their self-efficacy. Observations from this study similarly revealed that trainees often appeared unsure during lessons, hesitant in providing instructions, and at times struggled to manage their classrooms effectively. Such behaviours suggest gaps in lesson preparedness and self-assurance.

These patterns may stem from a lack of practical teaching experience and limited exposure to real classroom environments. Berger (2024) notes that many young adults today exhibit underdeveloped interpersonal skills, including difficulties in social greetings, expressing emotions, and engaging in face-to-face interactions. Such characteristics were also reported by English teachers in the present study, supported by practicum observations. Notably, these challenges were less evident in student questionnaire responses, likely due to the positive rapport trainees had established with learners.

Further qualitative feedback from English teachers revealed additional concerns: trainee teachers were at times perceived as socially withdrawn or overly reliant on peer support, and some avoided interacting with school staff or displayed arrogance when engaging with more

experienced colleagues. These findings raise broader questions about trainee preparedness for professional environments and their ability to function autonomously.

The increasing reliance on digital communication platforms has been suggested as a contributing factor to the decline in face-to-face interpersonal competence among youth (Subramanian, 2017). The current cohort of TESL trainees, largely digital natives may be experiencing a shift in communication norms, favouring mediated interaction over direct social engagement. This shift can lead to increased social anxiety and diminished interpersonal confidence, as supported by the literature.

Indeed, several teachers linked the observed uncertainty and low confidence of trainees to social anxiety, potentially exacerbated by excessive dependence on digital interactions. These patterns warrant deeper investigation and suggest the need for structured interventions to develop trainees' interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies prior to practicum placements. The findings also underscore a structural issue within the TESL curriculum: the absence of dedicated coursework on interpersonal skills. While the program effectively covers English language content and pedagogical strategies, it lacks explicit training in teacher-student and teacher-colleague interactions as conceptualised by Wubbels et al. (2012). This omission may partly explain the observed interpersonal deficiencies among trainees.

4.2 Implications for TESL Curriculum Enhancement

To address the identified gaps in the TESL trainee teachers' interpersonal competencies, several strategic interventions are recommended. First, it is essential for trainees to engage in purposeful communication exercises that extend beyond their immediate peer groups. By interacting with individuals of varying age groups, professional statuses, and cultural backgrounds including those with whom they may feel less comfortable, trainees can gradually develop greater social adaptability and confidence in diverse interpersonal situations. Such interactions can be facilitated through structured classroom simulations, role plays, or social engagement tasks embedded in course assessments.

Second, strengthening nonverbal communication skills should be a central focus. Emphasizing elements such as eye contact, facial expression, and posture can significantly enhance a teacher's classroom presence and the perceived authenticity of their communication. As noted by Berger (2024), establishing eye contact is particularly important, as it conveys sincerity, attentiveness, and competence, traits that are fundamental in fostering teacher credibility and rapport with students.

In addition, confidence-building activities should be systematically incorporated into the teacher education process. These may include microteaching sessions with iterative feedback, collaborative peer coaching, and guided self-reflection. Such practices provide safe and constructive environments for trainee teachers to critically evaluate their interpersonal behaviours and experiment with more effective communicative approaches, thereby reducing classroom uncertainty and hesitation.

Finally, a long-term solution lies in the integration of interpersonal skills training within the TESL curriculum itself. Whether introduced as a standalone course or woven into existing pedagogical and practicum modules, explicit instruction and assessment of interpersonal competencies are crucial. This curricular enhancement will ensure that trainee teachers are not only proficient in subject matter and pedagogical strategies but also equipped with the essential interpersonal abilities required to thrive in today's complex educational landscape.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight significant concerns regarding the interpersonal behaviours of TESL trainee teachers, particularly in relation to their limited ability to assert authority, manage classroom behaviour, and convey confidence during teaching. While trainees were favourably rated for their friendliness, this excessive affability appears to have compromised their ability to enforce discipline, project decisiveness, and manage students effectively, traits that are central to teacher authority and classroom control. Elevated levels of uncertain behaviour further reflect a lack of preparedness and confidence, which may negatively influence student motivation and learning outcomes. These shortcomings are likely influenced by the trainees' limited real-world experience, unfamiliarity with professional settings, and a broader generational decline in interpersonal competencies, potentially linked to increased social media dependency. Teacher feedback and practicum observations reinforce the notion that trainee teachers are often unaccustomed to navigating complex social environments, demonstrating discomfort in interacting with colleagues, students, and parents alike. While technology has enhanced communication in some domains, it has also contributed to the erosion of essential face-to-face social skills, thereby intensifying social anxiety and undermining effective interpersonal interaction. Moreover, the TESL curriculum itself lacks explicit emphasis on interpersonal skill development, particularly the eight key behaviours outlined in Wubbels et al.'s (2012) interpersonal teacher behaviour model. In response, it is imperative that teacher education programs integrate structured opportunities for trainees to build and practice interpersonal competencies through simulated interactions, guided reflection, peer modelling, and gradual exposure to diverse communicative scenarios. Emphasising non-verbal cues such as eye contact, assertive communication, and confident presence should also be prioritised. Strengthening these interpersonal dimensions will not only enhance teaching effectiveness but also ensure that TESL graduates are well-equipped to engage meaningfully within professional and educational communities.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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