RESEARCH ARTICLE

Effects of the Highly Immersive Programme on ESL Learners' Interest and Attitudes in Learning English in Belaga, Sarawak

Muhammad Firdauz Mohd Zainal[1], Train Tening Bato[1], Alan Gibson Ricky[1], Patrick Duffy Bayuong[2]*, Angela Felix Arip[2]

[1]Sekolah Kebangsaan Abun Matu, D/A Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah Belaga, Jalan Dian Ding, 96900 Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia.
[2]Pejabat Pendidikan Daerah Belaga, Jalan Dian Ding 96900 Belaga, Sarawak, Malaysia.

ABSTRACT - Although the issue of learners' attitudes towards learning English as a second language (ESL) has been around for a long time, much remains to be learned about the factors that shape their enthusiasm for learning, particularly those who reside in primary schools in rural areas, where it is well known that learners have negative perceptions of and poor performance in learning the English language. This study investigated the effects of the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) on ESL learners' interest and attitudes in learning English. In this study, the researchers selected 123 learners ranging from Year 4 to Year 6 from a rural primary school in Sarawak, Malaysia to answer the closed-ended questionnaires. This study observed the positive effects of HIP on ESL learners' interest in learning English and their attitudes toward it. The findings further suggested that HIP can boost ESL learners' English language use, support their language development, and contribute to enhanced grammar skills. This study hopes its findings will serve as a valuable resource for improving English language education in Malaysia, pedagogically, particularly by benefiting a programme like the HIP, which can address the challenges faced by rural learners who lack opportunities to learn and use English effectively.

1.0   INTRODUCTION

In many nations worldwide, the English language has long served as the de facto medium of communication. Many individuals worldwide are fluent in English because of its unquestionable significance in global trade and business as well as in cross-cultural contacts. According to Article 152 of the Federal Constitution, Malaysia has given English the status of a second language and given it the respect it deserves (Azmi, 2013; Gill, 2002). The requirement to speak English fluently is becoming increasingly important as individuals pursue school, need to speak English for work, or simply want to converse informally using English. Malaysian learners should master the English language. Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia (KPM) (2018a) addressed that learners must have a firm grasp of the English language for them to arm themselves with the abilities they need to keep up in a fast-developing global economy in this age of global competition.

In Malaysia, English is the second language, and all schools are required to offer it as a subject. One of the alternatives implemented by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) in 2016 was the introduction of The Highly Immersive Programme (HIP), which aimed to improve learners' English proficiency by increasing their exposure to the language. Since its launch in 2016, HIP has demonstrated positive effects on both learners and teachers. From the resources supplied by the teachers, a variety of activities were used to foster learners' language and comprehension development. HIP also impacted teachers' perceptions as well as the attitudes and interest of the learners.

Although the issue of learners' attitudes towards learning English as a second language (ESL) has been around for a long time, much remains to be learned about the factors that shape their enthusiasm for learning, particularly those who reside in primary schools in rural areas, where it is well known that learners have negative perceptions of and poor performance in learning the English language. Therefore, this study served as a platform to explore how ESL learners' interest and attitudes in the English language are affected by the HIP. Specifically, the following are the objectives of this study:

1. To investigate the effects of the HIP on ESL learners' interest in learning English

2. To study ESL learners' attitudes towards learning English through the HIP

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the effects of the HIP on ESL learners' interest in learning English?

2. What are the ESL learners' attitudes towards learning English through the HIP?

1.1   The Force Behind HIP

The HIP itself is not a new English language programme in Malaysian schools. In 1999 Circular (Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil. 1/1999: Garis Panduan Pengendalian Aktiviti Sokongan Bahasa Inggeris Di Sekolah), it was stated that all schools should organise English language activities for learners to extend the period as well as to give the learners more opportunities to use the language (KPM, 1999; MOE, 2016a). The organisation of learner assistance activities to expand their exposure to the English language was mandated for all schools. However, the project did not accomplish its primary goals, and as a result, it eventually lost its effectiveness. More than 90% of the roughly 190,000 respondents in a 2015 survey said they wanted English standards in government schools to be raised (Malaysian Digest, 2016). In 2016, MOE introduced the HIP (KPM, 2016). The goal of the HIP is to boost Malaysian learners' English language skills by providing them with increased exposure to the English language. In this regard, the HIP is introduced under the Memartabatkan Bahasa Melayu, Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI) policy. The policy means to Uphold the Malay Language and Strengthen the English Language (KPM, 2016). This policy's primary aim is to create learners who can acquire both English and Bahasa Melayu (the Malay language), communicate effectively in these languages, unite, and able to generate competitiveness up to the international level (KPM, 2016). Under the current MBMMBI strategy, the HIP is being revived in a big way and is being reintroduced with an intense emphasis (MOE, 2016a). Its pilot phase originally started in 2016, and by 2018, all primary and secondary schools had adopted it. Its goal is to establish a setting that encourages the use of English in all schools and is extremely immersion-rich in language. Through a range of In-Class and extracurricular activities, learners participating in the HIP are introduced to the English language.

Besides, the HIP also aligned with The Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013–2025. It is recognised as a key component of the English language improvement programme as commended in Wave 2 (2016-2020) of MEB 2013-2025 (MOE, 2016a). MEB aims to make learners proficient in two languages and globally competitive. The HIP incorporates six learner aspirations and embraces five out of eleven shifts (Shift 1, Shift 2, Shift 3, Shift 6, and Shift 9) highlighted in the MEB (KPM, 2016). On the other hand, HIP reinforces the 1999 Circular (Surat Pekeliling Ikhtisas Bil. 1/1999: Garis Panduan Pengendalian Aktiviti Sokongan Bahasa Inggeris di Sekolah) and complemented the National Education Philosophy or Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan (FPK) 1996 (KPM, 2016). The HIP seeks to increase learners' exposure to the English language, which will help them become more fluent in the language and instill good habits in learning and using the language. Hence, the HIP is an effective mechanism for improving ESL learners' proficiency. According to Jiew (2017), by giving learners a big amount of time to experience the target language, the HIP intends for boosting their level of proficiency in English. Besides that, the HIP seeks to instil virtuous habits regarding learning and using the English language.

1.2   HIP in Schools: Its Implementations

Schools are required to create English language-based activities that suit the Four Pillars of Activities. These Four Pillars of Activities (In-Class, Out-of-Class, Extra Class, and Outreach) support the creation of a highly immersive English language environment in schools (MOE, 2016b). A variety of English language assistance activities are introduced to be implemented in schools to increase pupils' exposure to the language. The activities enable the creation for the learners of a highly immersive language-rich environment based on a whole school strategy that empowers school heads, teachers, learners, parents, and the community. English language teachers, for instance, might incorporate interactive games into their lessons for In-Class exercises. Employing games such as digital game-based language learning helps in enhancing language acquisition (Dixon et al., 2022).

Gaines (2015) asserted that once the learners leave the classroom for Out-of-Class activities, those learning ESL might not be immersed in an English-rich atmosphere. Therefore, it is necessary to establish an environment that is rich in English. Schools can create English zones like English nooks or hallways, hold assemblies in English, or set up an English stage for learners to perform in this target language. The MOE took the initiative by calling for schools to create a Speaker's Corner in school and train the learners the public speaking skills in both Malay and English language (KPM, 2018b). Project-based learning (PBL) in language learning is also taken into the list. PBL is a method that actively involves learners in learning activities with higher motivation and interests (Adilah, 2023) and improves learners with low English language proficiency (Abu Bakar et al., 2019). In the context of learning, Out-of-Class learning improves learning and adds up a vital part of learners' development (Hsieh & Hsieh, 2019).

In addition, in schools, the teachers can hold extra lessons before the actual classes begin in the morning or the late afternoon after the classes end. For learners who were struggling academically, teachers might offer further coaching. A mentor-mentee programme is one way to help learners enhance their command of the English language (Santhi, 2011). Outreach programmes entail partnerships between educational institutions and other parties, including other institutions of higher learning, corporations, and non-governmental organisations. Boothe (2018) asserted that peer buddy programmes, home visits, school community collaborations, and educational field trips are examples of outreach initiatives that could improve the results of English language learning. Outreach initiatives can help meet the demand for ESL learners to acquire communication skills in a variety of contexts outside of the classroom. Among the outreach initiatives that engage schools, and other stakeholders are projects like pen buddy exchanges with other schools, English camps run in conjunction with the English Society of a university, and cultural exchange programmes with overseas schools.

1.3   Learners' Roles towards the HIP's Achievements

The learners are the learners and the heart of the HIP, and it is their responsibility to fully engage in the activities. All English-language activities planned by the schools will be attended by them. It is believed that learners will develop a genuine fondness for English and feel comfortable using it in their lives when they play, converse, and use this language in and outside the class, and during extracurricular activities. For the HIP to continue and flourish in schools, learners' feedback is crucial (Saminathan et al., 2020a). When taking part in HIP activities, the learners can discuss with their friends or classmates and collaborate to solve the assignments given by their teachers (Abdullah & Mohamad, 2020). As accentuated by Johnson et al. (2021), peer cooperation or cooperative learning in

context emphasises learning in group and peer interaction to promote learning, thus enhancing learners' comprehension with greater responsiveness and achievement. Besides, they can collaborate in organising and implementing the programmes and help in creating materials that will be used in the programmes (Abdullah & Mohammad, 2020). Learners are the target group to receive the benefits of the HIP. Thus, they should get involved directly, with teachers as facilitators (Saminathan et al., 2020a).

It is worth highlighting, as addressed by MOE (2016b) that learners are those who derive the advantages from the HIP. This implies that they are in a position of strength to capitalise on English language learning opportunities to establish new boundaries in language use MOE (2016b). They are the learners who will acquire 21st-century skills, develop the ability as well as the confidence to use the language, accelerate the use of the English language, take charge of their language learning, and identify ways to use the language as much as they can.

At school, all learners are required to participate in activities that require them to utilise the English language and are given the opportunity to do so. The HIP calls up everyone in learners near vicinity to participate in providing a supportive environment for the learner to utilise the English language every day of his or her life outside of school, not just in classrooms during English classes or in the school compound (MOE, 2016a). Thus, it is envisaged that by implementing this curriculum, the learners' English language competence level will increase, giving them greater opportunities to succeed at the university or employment level. Increased in self-assessed levels of English immersion in schools, positive attitudes towards the significance of learning and mastering English, and an improvement in overall English language proficiency are among the outcomes that the HIP is targeting for schools and learners.

1.4 Learners' Attitudes and Interest in Language Learning, and HIP Context

Attitude has been known as a core element in language learning (Habok et al., 2022; Kajan & Shah, 2019; Oxford & Shearin, 1996), and it influences English language achievement (Habok et al., 2022). Gardner (1983) asserted that learners' attitudes towards the language that they are learning and to the learning process of that language determined their motivation levels of learning. Learners' positive attitudes which are interrelated with their motivation must be strengthened to ensure the success of language learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Learning situations such as a fun learning environment (Krashen, 1987), continuous and consistent exposure, and various types of inputs (Littlewood, 1995) are necessary for language learning to inculcate favourable attitudes from the learners. Generally, learners' attitudes in language learning refer to their behaviours and sentiments towards the language they are learning.

Interest, in the context of language learning, refers to the feeling of wanting to learn or know about the language. Tin (2016) stated that learners' interest arises as they interact with something such as language-specific content or activities in a particular context such as a classroom or outside environment. To sustain learners' interest in language learning, a variety of language activities that interrelate between In-Class and Out-of-Class language activities should take place (Hussein et al., 2001). Learner interest in foreign language education arises from the complex interplay between various contextual characteristics, both within and outside the classroom (Liu, 2022). A study by Hsieh and Hsieh (2019) found a strong correlation between the usage of Out-of-Class resources and improved learning outcomes, indicating that providing autonomous learning to learners is beneficial for their language development. These kinds of activities promote learners' self-confidence and learning satisfaction.

Learners generally perceive the HIP positively in terms of their attitudes and interest towards learning English at school. A study by Saminathan et al. (2020b), and Matthew and Yamat (2020) found that learners who participated in the HIP had more positive attitudes towards learning English and were more interested in learning the language. The study also found that learners who participated in the HIP were more confident in their ability to speak English and were more likely to use English outside of the classroom. Findings from previous studies illuminated that learners who participated in the HIP were more motivated to learn English and were more engaged in their learning (Lavania & Nadesan, 2021; Matthew & Yamat, 2020). The study also found that learners who participated in the HIP had improved their English writing skills.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study used a survey-based quantitative research design. Data were primarily gathered via a closed-ended questionnaire.

2.2 Sample and Sampling Method

Strengthening the representativeness of the sample and the generalisability of the research results is significant through careful consideration of the sampling method (Golzar & Noor, 2022). For this study, the researchers employed a non-probability sampling technique through convenience sampling in selecting the participants. The sampling technique employed in this study offers practical benefits, including easy accessibility (Alvi, 2016; Rahi, 2017; Golzar & Noor, 2022), reduced cost, and time efficiency (Alvi, 2016; Golzar & Noor, 2022; Stratton, 2021). These benefits applied to this study, too. The participants were 123 primary school learners (56 males and 67 females) ranging from Year 4 until Year 6, the upper primary learners. The selection of these learners was based on their potential cognitive and developmental readiness, the relevance of educational programmes to this age group, and practical considerations for data collection. They are more likely to complete the questionnaire independently, reducing the time for the researchers to assist them extensively. These reasons collectively strengthened the validity and reliability of the findings.

All participants are studying in the same school, a rural national primary school located in Belaga District, Sarawak, Malaysia. The total number of Year 1 through Year 6 learners in the school is 350. All participants are involved in the HIP organised by the school throughout the Year 2023. It is important to note that not all participants engage in similar programmes within the HIP organised by the school, as some programmes specifically target different groups of learners based on academic goals. For instance, all 350 learners

participated in the "Out-of-Class" programme. The activities include I Want to Share, English Fun Zone, and English Corner. The "I Want to Share" activity provided opportunities and platforms for learners to share information and knowledge in sharing sessions. While the "Out-of-Class" programme involved all 350 learners, the "Extra Class" programme involved only the upper primary learners in activities such as Parking Lots, and Tree of Success. The "Parking Lots" activity generated more ideas within the learners themselves by raising off-topic questions, ideas or discussion during a lesson. A brief explanation was added to ensure that the participants who meet the study requirements can complete the questionnaire. The profiles for the participants include gender, age, and ethnic group.

2.3   Instrument

The researchers developed a questionnaire as an instrument to investigate the effects of the HIP on ESL learners' interest in learning English, and to study their attitudes toward learning English through the HIP. The questionnaire was prepared in English, and it consists of two parts, namely Parts A and B. Part A is meant to collect data on participants' demographic profiles, including gender, age, and ethnic group. Part B is meant to obtain data on the effects of the HIP on ESL learners' interest in learning English (Items 1-5), and ESL learners' attitudes towards learning English through the HIP (Items 6-10). The ordinal variable for the questionnaires is the level of agreement through the Likert scale. Part B adopted a five-point Likert scale (1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Not Sure, 4: Agree: 5: Mostly Agree). The researchers themselves constructed the questionnaire items with careful consideration, through discussions and a close, thorough reading of related past studies.

The participants were grouped into two to ease the administration procedures. The questionnaire was administered in a classroom within 30 minutes per group during one of the activities in the "Extra Class" programme on a schooling day. The questionnaire administration adhered carefully to the ethical guidelines. They are informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity. Most importantly, the administration did not interfere with the formal schooling period in the classroom. During the administration session, one of the researchers began by explaining the study and the questionnaire to the participants. The rest of the researchers provided assistance and guidance to the participants while they were answering the questionnaire. The explanation from the researcher was conducted in a "one item at a time" mode.

2.4   Pilot Study

A pilot study involving 10 participants ranging from Year 4 to Year 6 in the same school as the main study was conducted using a similar questionnaire, with participants selected through a random sampling technique. The participants were selected from Year 4 to Year 6 because they accurately reflected the main study's participant group. The selection was employed according to Shakir and Rahman (2022) - their profiles, and basis of convenience, and accessibility. Moreover, according to Teijlingen and Hundley (2001), when selecting participants for a pilot study, their profiles should demonstrate that they (1: share almost similar characteristics with the target sample to a great extent; and 2: meet the need to highlight any possible inadequacy in the research method). An organised and impartial analysis was performed. Based on the findings, the questionnaire demonstrated a good level of understanding. However, a handful of the items were puzzling or unclear. The feedback from the participants was used to revise the items. The questionnaire used in the main study was improved based on the results of the pilot study, ensuring that it would elicit accurate, trustworthy, and useful data in the main study.

2.5   Reliability

Several statistical analyses were employed by the researchers to ensure that the findings were reliable. Descriptive statistics were conducted using SPSS to gain insight into the broad trends and data dispersion characteristics. A 5-point Likert Scale was used to collect data, a well-established method for assessing subjective opinions, beliefs, or attitudes. Finally, Cronbach's Alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the questionnaire, ensuring that the responses were consistent and free from random error. A Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.798 was achieved for the section of the questionnaire that measured learners' interest and attitudes (Table 1). This value is well above the suggested threshold of 0.70, indicating a satisfactory (George & Mallery, 2003), good (Bolarinwa, 2015; DeVelli, 2017), and high level (Streiner & Norman, 2008) internal consistency and reliability.

Table 1

Reliability statistics for learners' questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.798	10

3.0   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion of this study were presented concurrently in three major sections: Demographic Profiles of Participants, Findings on the Effects of HIP on ESL Learners' Interest in Learning English, and Findings on ESL Learners' Attitudes Towards Learning English Through HIP.

3.1   Demographic Profiles of Participants

This section discusses the findings of the study on the demographic profiles of the participants (ESL learners in context). The demographic profiles include gender, age, and ethnic group. Table 2 presents the demographic profiles of the learners in terms of their gender.

Table 2

Demographic profiles of learners (gender)

Genders	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	56	45.5
Female	67	54.5
Total	123	100.0

Table 3 shows a wide age distribution across three age groups: 10, 11, and 12 years old. The 12-year-old learners made up a sizable percentage of 36.6% (n=45). The largest demographic is 54.5% of the respondents' size with 67 11-year-old learners. Since 11-year-old learners dominated the demographic, any general trends or patterns in the findings may be strongly influenced by their characteristics. The 10-year-old learners made up the smallest sizable percentage of 8.9% (n=11). All age groups are crucial when studying age-related trends. Their early age may reveal patterns or traits that may change as they age. Despite their numbers, each group contributes to the diversity of the learners and will be significant in future analysis.

Table 3

Demographic profiles of learners (age)

Ages	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
12	45	36.6
11	67	54.5
10	11	8.9
Total	123	100.0

Table 4 demonstrates the diversity of learners' ethnic groups. The most represented group was Kayan with a total of 32 learners (26%). Malay appeared as the second highest-represented group with 18 learners (14.6%). The other three groups, Kejaman, Iban and Kenyah came up with two digits in number of learners which respectively made up a sizable percentage of 11.4% (n=14), 10.6% (n=13), and 9.8% (n=12). The remaining groups came up with a single digit in number of learners, ranging from 1 to 7, and contributing sizable percentages ranging between 0.8% and 5.7%.

Table 4

Demographic profiles of learners (ethnic group)

Ethnic groups	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Malay	18	14.6
Chinese	7	5.7
Iban	13	10.6
Kayan	32	26.0
Kenyah	12	9.8
Sekapan	3	2.4
Lahanan	4	3.3
Sihan	5	4.1
Tanjung	4	3.3
Kejaman	14	11.4
Dusun	2	1.6
Punan	4	3.3
Bugis	1	0.8
Bekatan	2	1.6
Melanau	1	0.8
Philippine	1	0.8
Total	123	100

3.2 Findings on the Effects of HIP on ESL Learners' Interest in Learning English

This section discusses the findings of the study to answer the first research question: What are the effects of HIP on ESL learners' interest in learning English? A descriptive analysis involving the mean and standard deviation was conducted to determine the effects of HIP on ESL learners' interest in learning English. For this study, it is best to present the findings as perceived learners' interest. The findings of this data analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Findings on the Effects of HIP on ESL Learners' Interest in Learning English

	Items 1-5	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I believe that the Highly Immersive Programme has helped me to improve my understanding of English grammar and vocabulary.	3.65	1.01
2	I believe that the Highly Immersive Programme has helped me to learn more about different cultures.	3.60	0.96
3	I believe that the Highly Immersive Programme has helped me to be more creative in my use of English.	3.82	0.99
4	I believe that the Highly Immersive Programme has helped me to be more critical in my thinking about English.	3.69	0.89
5	I believe that the Highly Immersive Programme has helped me to be more successful in my studies.	3.97	1.04

The examination of the effects of HIP on ESL learners' interest in learning English involved analysing five items (Items 1-5) within the questionnaire. Insight into these effects can be gained by examining the mean scores of items derived from learners' responses. The average response on a scale is represented by the mean score, a measure of central tendency. Item 5 received the highest mean score of 3.97. This indicated that the majority of learners perceived the HIP had improved their academic performance, viewing it as beneficial for their academic achievement in learning English. In a different view, this study suggested that this positive finding implied the effectiveness of HIP, thus supporting the notion that a well-designed educational programme such as HIP can significantly influence learners' interest and outcomes in a language learning context. In a previous study, Lavania and Nadesan (2021) mentioned that HIP can have a positive impact on learners' language and academic performance for the learners involved in the programme. The standard deviation of 1.04, on the other hand, indicated a significant amount of variability in the responses, indicating differing opinions among learners.

Item 3 received the second-highest mean score, 3.82. Lavania and Nadesan (2021) mentioned that HIP also can help give learners a positive impact on their language and creativity. This correlation may stem from specific HIP activities designed by the school to foster creativity, such as I Want to Share, English Fun Zone, or Storytelling and Poetry Sessions. These activities likely provided learners with opportunities to express themselves creatively in English, thereby enhancing both language skills and imaginative thinking. While this is a positive indication of the HIP's impact on learners' creativity, the standard deviation of 0.99 highlighted the presence of variability in the responses.

The mean scores for Items 1 and 4 were 3.65 and 3.69, respectively. This indicated that the HIP conducted by the school effectively targeted specific areas such as grammar and vocabulary improvement, as well as critical thinking skills, through focused language activities. This corresponds to Ansawi (2017) who asserted that HIP could improve the vocabulary of the learners by providing them with exposure to the English language and literature. Moreover, the positive mean scores for these two items reflected the HIP's beneficial impacts on learners' interest, overall learning experiences, and perceptions of learning English. These results, along with the item's respective standard deviation, 1.01 and 0.89, indicated that the HIP has a moderately positive but variable impact on respondents' understanding of English grammar and critical thinking.

Item 2 received the lowest mean score of 3.60. This suggested that while HIP effectively enhances learners' grammar and vocabulary improvement, creativity, critical thinking skills, and academic performance, there may be opportunities to enrich cultural education components. This is a good kind of learning exposure to increase learners' engagement with, understanding of, and interest in different cultures within the HIP, harmonising more closely to build unity through education, and with the holistic learning goal as stated in the National Philosophy of Malaysian Education (NPME) - to develop students holistically through education (MOE, 2013). The past studies conducted by Ler (2012) mentioned that all identified problems are closely related to the rural cultural setting, indicating that rural cultural factors adversely affect the English proficiency of rural learners. The standard deviation of 0.96 for this dimension indicated that learners had mixed feelings about the HIP's effectiveness in promoting cultural learning.

Overall, all 5 items resulted in a mean score of 3.75 and a standard deviation of 0.98. These indicated a generally positive level of interest among learners, though there are some variations. Finally, the HIP appeared to have a positive impact on learners' English language learning and academic success. As cited by Jiew (2017), the HIP at the school under study is mostly served for its purpose to increase learners' English language proficiency. The HIP could be improved further by emphasising cultural understanding, as this is where the lowest mean score was recorded.

3.3   Findings on ESL Learners' Attitudes Towards Learning English Through HIP

This section discusses the findings of the study to answer the second research question: What are the ESL learners' attitudes towards learning English through HIP? A descriptive analysis involving the mean and standard deviation was conducted to determine ESL learners' attitudes towards HIP and the overall mean. The findings of this data analysis are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

Findings on ESL Learners' Attitudes Towards Learning English through HIP

	Items 6-10	Mean	Std. Deviation
6	I feel more confident in my English skills after participating in the Highly Immersive Programme	3.60	1.02
7	I feel more comfortable using English in different settings after participating in the Highly Immersive Programme	3.39	1.06
8	I feel more motivated to learn English after participating in the Highly Immersive Programme	3.44	1.01
9	I feel more self-assured with my pronunciation after participating in the Highly Immersive Programme	3.94	0.94
10	I feel more engaged in my learning of English after participating in the Highly Immersive Programme	3.88	1.22

The examination of the ESL learners' attitudes towards learning English through HIP involved analysing five items (Items 6-10) within the questionnaire. The report focuses on evaluating the attitudes of 123 learners by examining their self-reported motivation, comfort, confidence, and proficiency in speaking and writing English. An important understanding of the learners' attitudes toward the HIP can be gained from the mean scores of their ratings. It should be noted that these scores reflect the average value of the learners' responses, providing a snapshot of the group's general attitudes.

Item 9 received the highest mean score of 3.94. This indicated positive attitudes among learners towards learning English, underscoring the HIP's efficacy in improving learners' pronunciation after their engagement in the language learning activities. Moreover, the language learning activities conducted by the school within the HIP are collectively appropriate, thus making learners feel more confident in their pronunciation abilities, reflecting the success of the HIP in this area. Although there was some variation in the responses, as indicated by the standard deviation of 0.94, not every respondent agreed with this sentiment. In this respect, past studies reported that the low language proficiency of Malaysian ESL learners has been an issue in the implementation of the HIP in Malaysian schools (Abdullah & Mohammad, 2020; Cheng et al., 2019; Nijat et al., 2019). The finding of a high mean score of 3.94 for learners' self-assured with their pronunciation directly correlates with the past studies highlighting both the initial challenges and the subsequent successes of the HIP in Malaysian schools. The positive learner attitudes and increased pronunciation confidence observed in this study are consistent with the improvements reported by Abdullah and Mohammad (2020), indicating that the HIP's long-term implementation has yielded significant benefits in learners' language proficiency.

Item 10 received the second-highest mean score, 3.88. This suggested that the HIP has a generally positive effect on learners' levels of engagement. The high level of engagement reported by the learners in this study was likely contributed by HIP's interactive and immersive activities conducted by the school, and engaging content and materials planned by the school. Furthermore, the high engagement implied HIP's overall effectiveness in making the learning of the English language an engaging and enjoyable experience. The standard deviation of 1.22 highlighted the fact that there is a lot of variation in the answers.

The mean scores for Items 6, 7, and 8 were 3.60, 3.39, and 3.44, respectively. Although the results showed generally positive attitudes, the standard deviations (ranging from 1.01 to 1.06) showed that the respondents' attitudes varied, which may indicate that while some learners feel significantly improved in these areas, others may not share the same level of enthusiasm. A previous study conducted by Chandrasegaran and Mohammad (2021) elucidated that the programme under investigation adopts a comprehensive, whole-school approach. This inclusive methodology actively involves and empowers all key stakeholders, such as parents and the wider community, fostering a highly immersive English language environment within primary schools. This immersive setting is instrumental in boosting pupils' self-assuredness and reducing their apprehension about committing errors. By creating a supportive atmosphere where language mistakes are viewed as steppingstones rather than stumbling blocks, the HIP enhances the pupils' comfort and familiarity with their use of English.

The analysis of learners' attitudes revealed that HIP has had a positive and significant impact on their English language learning. The range of responses, however, emphasised how important individual differences are in learning experiences and outcomes. It might be advantageous to look into and address the areas with lower mean scores and higher variability to maximise the HIP's effectiveness. Overall, all 5 items presumably capturing the overall attitudes of learners towards the HIP, showed a mean score of 3.65, with a standard deviation of 1.05. This suggested a generally positive attitude among the learners towards the HIP.

4.0   CONCLUSION

As stated earlier, the objectives of this study are to investigate the effects of the HIP on ESL learners' interest in learning English and to study ESL learners' attitudes towards learning English through the HIP. The findings of this study conveyed that the HIP benefited learners with some good qualities in terms of their interest in learning English. They thought the HIP had supplemented them with comprehension of English grammar and vocabulary, knowledge of many cultures, creativity in the use of English, critical thinking about English, and academic performance. Meanwhile, in the context of ESL learners' attitudes towards learning English through the HIP, the findings informed that the learners showed favourable attitudes, implying that the learners become more confident, motivated, and engaged in using the English language. Furthermore, they expressed positive attitudes, indicating that the HIP has helped boost their confidence and improve their language proficiency. Some limitations of this study include the fact that it involved only one primary school and the limited number of items in the questionnaire. The involvement of only one primary school in this study restricted the generalisability of the findings to a broader population. Meanwhile, the limited number of items may not comprehensively capture all aspects of learners' interest and attitudes, potentially overlooking important variables in the data.

As for the implication, the study's findings conveyed that the HIP has effectively enhanced ESL learners' interest, confidence, motivation, and proficiency in English. This demonstrates the potential for HIP to significantly enhance English language education in Malaysia, especially for rural learners with limited access to effective English learning opportunities. The study hopes its results will be a valuable resource for improving English language education in Malaysia, particularly by supporting a programme like the HIP, which can address the challenges faced by rural learners in learning and using English effectively. Considering the results of this study, it is important to continue and enhance HIP interventions within rural educational institutions. This study also suggests that more research should be conducted to assess the effectiveness and long-term viability of HIP in various contexts and settings. To improve the generalisability of the findings, future research should include more comprehensive details about the sample size and sampling method used, ensuring a representation of diverse demographic factors such as age, gender, and grade (primary).

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Muhammad Firdauz Mohd Zainal (Conceptualisation; Investigation; Formal Analysis; Writing - Original Draft; Methodology; Investigation)

Train Tening Bato (Conceptualisation; Investigation; Formal Analysis; Writing - Original Draft; Methodology; Investigation)

Alan Gibson Ricky (Validation; Formal Analysis; Writing - Original Draft; Methodology; Investigation)

Patrick Duffy Bayuong (Validation; Formal Analysis; Data Curation; Writing - Review & Editing; Supervision; Resource)

Angela Felix Arip (Formal Analysis; Writing - Original Draft)

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