

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rural Malaysian Teachers' Perception and Classroom Implementation of the CEFR-Aligned English Language Syllabus

Normala Sulaiman

Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Segamat Branch, 85000 Segamat, Johor, Malaysia.

ABSTRACT - Contextual inequalities between rural and urban schools can affect the implementation of curriculum reform. However, less attention has been paid to the role of rural schoolteachers as key players in the process of change. With the recent alignment of the English language syllabus in Malaysia to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the responses of rural teachers are particularly worthy of investigation. This qualitative paper explores the perceptions of rural schoolteachers regarding the curriculum in general and the manifestation of their perceptions through classroom instructions, using the Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Semi structured interviews with nine English-language teachers were conducted to identify how they perceived the new curriculum reform, while 27 classroom observations were carried out to investigate the delivery of the new syllabus. Each teacher was observed three times, and their teaching instructions were recorded. These nine teachers were purposively recruited because of their geographical situation, being in rural schools. All data were thematically analysed. Results indicated that insufficient training, technological limitation and limited resources had negatively influenced the curriculum implementation, despite the positive reactions expressed regarding its contents. The findings of this study are relevant to curriculum developers as they address the concerns of rural teachers in achieving the desired outcomes of the reform.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

English language teaching in Malaysia has undergone different phases of reform since 1957, to the most recent in 2018, focusing on the integration of an international language policy as the foundation of the reform (Ahmad Afip et al., 2019; Rashid et al., 2017). This recent reform sees the alignment of the English language curriculum to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in Malaysian schools. The reform agenda, which was translated into the English Language Education Roadmap for Malaysia 2015-2025 (MOE, 2015), serves as a guide for teachers and curriculum developers to ensure students can attain the targeted proficiency levels of English aligned with the CEFR scales from pre-school to tertiary levels (Ahmad Afip et al., 2019).

The fact that the CEFR has been widely used internationally (Council of Europe, 2001; Nguyen & Hamid, 2020) has made the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) confident that it can also cater to the specific needs of learners in Malaysia (MOE, 2015). Being an internationally recognized standard, the CEFR categorizes language users into three main categories: proficient users (C1 & C2), independent users (B1 & B2) and basic users (A1 & A2). Nevertheless, as the CEFR is a new notion in the country, various issues pertaining to its implementation have been raised (Aziz et al., 2018; Mohamad Khair & Mohd Shah, 2021). Textbook choices and teacher training are among the most common issues researched. One thing that seems to have been overlooked in recent research is the flaws in the process of introducing the reform to teachers. In a national curriculum reform, most decisions are made outside the classroom by people who might have a different educational ideology from that of the teachers (Tikkanen et al., 2020) and yet the effectiveness of curriculum reform depends on how implementation is carried out in the classrooms.

Considering that teachers are the decision-makers in the classroom, their knowledge, belief, and perceptions play a fundamental role in the effective implementation of reforms. Thus, this study explores how secondary school teachers in rural Malaysia fully comprehend the CEFR and how they translate their perceived understanding in the classroom. Using Ajzen's TPB (1991), the relationships between teachers' beliefs, attitudes and behaviour in the classroom can be further explained as this theory posits that an individual's intention to perform the behaviour under consideration is stronger when it is observed as more favourable.

1.1 CEFR-based Curriculum Design: Acceptance or Rejection?

The CEFR has been translated into 40 languages, and its use has spread outside Europe, from Asia to Latin America, as an aid to defining levels for learning, teaching and assessment (Rahman, 2014). The framework has been adopted by many countries, particularly as a reference in language education curriculum development. Generally, when the CEFR was implemented in countries like Thailand, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia and China, teachers and government officials view the framework as having potential to help raise the level of English competence within their educational system (Foley, 2019). As such, a large amount of work was put into the establishment and propagation of the CEFR, as well as into the study of its employment and impact on the language education system across the globe (Nguyen & Hamid, 2020). However, the use of the CEFR has not always been accepted without debate.

On one hand, there have been numerous studies indicating positive views on the content of the CEFR and its relevance to curriculum design. In Australia, for instance, the CEFR is described as providing academic and professional benefits, while promoting better curriculum design with its international standard (Normand-Marconnet & Lo Bianco, 2015). In Vietnam, Ngo's (2017) study of academic staff of an English language faculty in a university, found that the academics have positive attitudes towards the CEFR, and its relevance to curriculum development and assessment. Similarly, Musoeva (2019) conducted a study in Uzbekistan, and it was found that teachers generally have positive perceptions of the CEFR, after reading and familiarizing themselves with the contents.

On the other hand, negative outcomes have been reported in term of teachers' acceptance, adoption, and knowledge of the CEFR. Teachers' understanding of the CEFR varies across geographical locations. It was reported that teachers in Taiwan and Hong Kong are less familiar with the CEFR compared to teachers from the UK and France and issues of limited conceptual understanding continue to be reported in more recent Malaysian studies (Uri, 2025). At times, teachers may be accepting of the principles of the CEFR but unable to adopt the framework in their teaching practices. Sülü and Cullen (2014) did a survey among language teachers in Turkey and reported that even though the teachers thought it was crucial to integrate the CEFR in teacher education, 66.7% of them did not take the CEFR into consideration when teaching.

It is important to note that teachers' understanding of the CEFR documents is necessary because what they think, know, and believe has a crucial impact on their classroom practices. For an effective delivery of the CEFR, teachers require clearer guidance, sustained professional support and stronger institutional structures, as highlighted in recent analyses of CEFR-M implementation (Sukri et al., 2025). This is essential because the CEFR and any related documents to it may be perceived as a threat if teachers do not understand the concept (Zheng et al., 2016). Changes in the classroom may not be possible if teachers have not fully embraced the concept and supported by clear policies and professional development (Teng, 2023).

Despite the concern raised, teachers' understanding of the CEFR concept has not been viewed as a problem. As the selections of the CEFR-aligned textbooks and support materials have been carefully done with the help of the CEFR experts employed by the Curriculum Development Division of the country, the Malaysian MOE believed that there should be no issue in the implementation process of the new syllabus. The framework is a powerful attraction to a new, comprehensive, and internationally validated approach to language education (Barrault-Méthy, 2013). In fact, CEFR was also chosen because it saves time and effort when existing framework is borrowed rather than created (Nguyen & Hamid, 2016). The questions are, do teachers fully comprehend the concept of the CEFR? Or are they ready to implement significant changes in their teaching methods to cater for the CEFR? These questions will be addressed in this paper.

1.2 Ajzen's TPB (1991)

What teachers do in the classroom is to some extent going to be determined by what they believed (Nation & Macalister, 2010). However, teacher beliefs and behaviour in the classroom are not always aligned. One of the theoretical frameworks that explains the relationships between teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour in the classroom is a model proposed by Ajzen (1991). This theory can be applied in explaining teachers' beliefs, attitudes and perceptions in curriculum change. For instance, teachers' positive beliefs of the new curriculum may be affected by the negative feedback given by their colleagues and principal. Pressure from the school's expectations, or even parents, may result in teachers behaving in certain manners that comply with either the school's or society's views.

The perceived behaviour control component of TPB highlights how teachers' behaviour in the classroom may be controlled by internal and external factors. Internal factor may include teachers' understanding of curriculum documents or confidence in implementing new teaching strategies, while an external factor may include the location of the school, availability of resources or students' proficiency levels. For example, a teacher in a rural school may face challenges in fully applying the new curriculum due to limited technological resources or less prepared students.

Ajzen's TPB also emphasises the role of subjective norms and social influences in shaping behaviour, which is particularly relevant in the context of curriculum reform in rural schools. Teachers' intentions to adopt new teaching practices are not solely dependent on their personal beliefs or perceived control but are also shaped by the expectations of key stakeholders, such as school administrators, colleagues, parents, and the wider community. In rural settings, where teachers may feel heightened accountability due to limited resources or closer-knit communities, these social pressures can significantly influence their instructional choices. For instance, a teacher may hold positive attitudes toward the CEFR-aligned curriculum but may hesitate to fully implement innovative methods if they anticipate resistance from parents or colleagues who prefer traditional approaches.

1.3 Teachers' Responsibilities in Curriculum Reform

Teachers play an essential role in the implementation of curriculum reform. It has been argued that classroom teachers are the medium through which the curriculum will be passed on to the students (Lyle, 2013). However, their voices and professional capital that they bring to the processes of curriculum reforms are often neglected (Lee & Lo, 2013). In a mechanistic change where a top-down approach of curriculum change is employed, reforms tend to have a weak impact on the everyday life of schools because they often fail to enhance ownership over the reform and build aligned understanding of the reform across different levels of the educational system (Chow, 2013; Tikkanen et al., 2020). In Malaysia for example, the reforms are considered 'owned' by the political and administrative elite and not by the professionals who have to implement them (Bush et al., 2019). Teachers, as implementers, receive the curriculum document as a mandate to be delivered to students.

In the recent ELT curriculum reform, a special committee, the English Language Standards and Quality Council (ELSQC) was formed to oversee the development of the new curriculum. This council consists of university lecturers, independent consultants and

representatives from the English Language Teaching Centre (ELTC) as well as private organisations instead of practising teachers. They oversee planning, implementing, monitoring, evaluating and reviewing the curriculum. Despite the Malaysian government effort of preparing a soft-landing for the teachers to get used to the new framework, it is undeniable that a smooth-sailing curriculum reform is too good to be true (Mohamad Khair & Mohd Shah, 2021). This is because, the absence of teacher representatives in the development process may cause inconsistencies between classroom reality and printed curriculum documents. The fact that rural schoolteachers are even more likely to be distanced from the curriculum reform process has given interest for this study to be carried out.

1.4 Challenges for Rural Schools

Several past studies have reported issues surrounding the CEFR implementation in schools (Aziz & Uri, 2017; Kok & Aziz, 2019; Mohamad Khair & Mohd Shah, 2021; Uri & Aziz, 2018), however, very few have looked at the rural schoolteachers and observed their teaching instructions. As such, using Ajzen's (1991) model, the different responses listed by Adamson and Davison (2003), and Fullan's (2001) dimensions of change, this study focused on rural schools. In Malaysia, the gap between rural and urban students' academic performance is noticeable. Rural students have very little exposure to English compared to students who live in urban areas. Anbalan et al. (2022) study found that rural students did not perform well in the four skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking because they did not use English outside the classroom. Similarly, Awang et al. (2025) found that insufficient access to learning resources is a primary reason to developing English-speaking skills in rural settings. For a change to happen both in rural and urban schools, changes in attitudes of teachers and learners are essential. Teachers need to take a fresh viewpoint on the new change, helping the learners throughout the process because when learners have to cope with a change that is beyond their experience and expectations, it is difficult for them to understand the value of the change (Nation & Macalister, 2010). At this point, any attempt to introduce change may fail. Changing attitudes of rural students is a definite challenge because students do not see the need of using the language in their immediate environment.

In addition, having to create awareness of the western culture is a great challenge for teachers who are teaching in rural schools, particularly when the change involves a borrowed international policy, with foreign contents. Gong and Holliday (2013) carried out a study in a rural school in China and reported that some of the topics in the textbook were very unfamiliar to the students that they had nothing to talk about in class. This calls for a review on target and source culture materials in teaching an international language such as English. Target culture refers to the culture of a country where English is spoken as the first language while source culture is the present language learners' own culture (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). Teaching rural students using materials from the target culture may create a cultural conflict for the students. The presentation of materials that is foreign to the students may place teachers from the source culture in a troubling position because they may not have the answers to their students' questions about unfamiliar cultural information in the text (McConachy, 2019). In this study, it is highly relevant to identify teachers' perception of the materials because the prescribed textbook is enacted as a curriculum document that is to be used in the classroom.

The use of ICT has caused a significant contribution in bringing about improvement in the quality of education at all locations (Kapur, 2019). However, this is not the case for most rural schools in Malaysia. Known as a country with unique geographical conditions consisting of a peninsula and northern part of Borneo/Kalimantan Island, Malaysia is facing a more challenging situation with respect to its efforts to reform rural schools (Rahman & Ariffin, 2020). For some remote schools with limited road access, sending ICT infrastructure can be quite a stressing and daunting task. This eventually affects the whole idea of reform as students and teachers may not be able to use available resources in teaching and learning processes.

For positive changes to be promoted, it is useful to look at this issue from the context of rural areas where on-going resources to support teachers are still lacking and the teachers involved in the implementation of change are neglected. In the light of these findings and literature, the research questions of this paper are (1) what the rural schoolteachers' perceptions of the new ELT curriculum reform are and (2) how their perceptions are translated into their teaching instructions.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

To examine how teachers implemented the new curriculum in their classrooms, a qualitative case study was conducted over a three-month period in three rural secondary schools in Malaysia. Semi structured interviews facilitated the understanding of teachers' general perceptions of the new curriculum, that is to answer research question 1, while classroom observation is carried out to explain research question 2. During the interviews, teachers were asked to reflect on changes in the curriculum, teacher training and teaching materials. All interviews were conducted in English, following the preference of the teachers. Each interview lasted from 45 to 65 minutes and was audio-recorded using a recording device.

The study also made use of classroom observations to examine teachers' classroom practices. Before observations were carried out, consents were sought from the teachers and some rapport was made to avoid observation phobia (Le, 2011). Non-participant classroom observations (Wragg, 2012) were carried out with all nine teachers who were observed three times, focusing on their classroom environment, content delivery and instructional overview. Each classroom observation lasted for 35 to 45 minutes. The lessons observed included teaching of writing, reading, listening, speaking and literature. Copies of the teachers' lesson plans were also obtained to explore how much the lessons were aligned with the CEFR syllabus. In doing this, analyses of the textbook, "Close-up" and the curriculum documents was done. For each observation, Ajzen's TPB was used to explain teachers' responses to educational reform through their teaching instructions. Observational data was also analysed using six different responses to curriculum change proposed by Adamson and Davison (2003).

Three different secondary schools in the southern part of Malaysia were chosen to complete this study. These schools were chosen because they are similarly (1) located in the rural part of the country with low to average socio-economic status; (2) of quite the same performance in national exams, and (3) multilingually enrolled. Malay language is the official language in Malaysia, with Chinese, Tamil and other indigenous languages used widely in everyday context. Islam is the main religion in the country, followed by Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. It is significant to note the background of the schools because geographical locations, being in urban or rural areas, may have a significant influence on their teaching instructions. Rural schools were specifically selected in this study to promote further understanding on rural education, which has always been overlooked in the past.

In this study, nine teacher participants were purposively recruited from English language teachers teaching Secondary 3 in all three schools chosen. The logic behind purposeful selection of samples in qualitative research is to identify information-rich informants who can supply the data required to answer the research question (Crowley, 1994). Secondary 3 teachers were selected because these teachers are the ones responsible for introducing and implementing CEFR in the classrooms in 2018. Following Patton (1990)'s maximum variation sampling, the participants varied in age, years of teaching experience, gender and their qualifications. The use of maximum variation sampling helps give insights about the topic without having to obtain a massive sample. The nine teacher participants gave diversity in terms of age, gender, years of teaching experience, background histories, and educational background. On these principles, nine teachers from three schools were recruited to be observed and interviewed. Ethical approval was obtained from Macquarie University. All participants provided written informed consent, were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured of confidentiality. Schools and teachers were anonymized in all analyses and reports. The list of participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Details of teacher participants

| Pseudonyms | Age | Years of Teaching Experience | School | Qualification |
|------------|-----|------------------------------|--------|-------------------|
| Lina | 30 | 5 | A | Degree - UK |
| Mahira | 37 | 11 | A | Degree - Malaysia |
| Hud | 30 | 6 | A | Degree - UK |
| Aiman | 51 | 25 | B | Degree - Malaysia |
| Zarul | 35 | 12 | B | Degree - Malaysia |
| Umar | 27 | 3 | B | Degree - Malaysia |
| Marsya | 49 | 20 | C | Degree - Malaysia |
| Fatin | 42 | 18 | C | Degree - Malaysia |
| Sofia | 50 | 23 | C | Degree - Malaysia |

All interview data were transcribed verbatim, as the main concern of the study was on the content rather than speech pattern (Jefferson, 2004). The different sources of data were categorized according to the nine teacher participants, so that each teacher provided two different sources of data from the interview and observations. The second stage involved qualitative coding analysis using NVivo 12, in which the segmenting sentences were classified and labelled using the words of the participants. Coding was conducted inductively and 30% of the coding was cross-checked by a second coder to ensure reliability. After the codes were identified, they were organized into different themes, in relation to the research questions constructed at the beginning of this study. Thematic approach allows data to be reduced through a coding process in order to be presented in an explicit form of interpretation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this study, the use of word analysis is more favoured than linguistic feature analysis. The themes emerged from repetitive structures and key-word-in-context emphasised perceptions of the curriculum, teaching instructions and challenges in implementation. The classroom observation data was also thematically analysed with close reference to TPB explained in the earlier section. Some of the important traits noted in the qualitative field notes were classroom activities, teachers' pedagogical approaches, and students' engagement in the lessons. Triangulation between interviews, observations, lesson plans, and curriculum documents enhanced the credibility of findings.

3.0 RESULTS

The results are presented in accordance with the research questions formulated at the beginning of the study. The two research questions were aimed at (1) exploring what teachers think of the recent curriculum reform and (2) how their thoughts are translated into teaching practices in the classroom.

3.1 Research Question 1: Teachers' Perceptions of the CEFR-aligned Curriculum

It is appropriate to combine the Results and Discussion sections into a single section. However, authors are allowed to present the Results and Discussion separately. Clear and concise results are required. The significance of the work's findings should be discussed in detail throughout the discussion section. Extensive citations and discussion of already published material should be avoided.

3.1.1 Theme 1: Positive Perceptions of Curriculum Content but Doubts about Implementation

Six of the participants interviewed agreed that the content of the curriculum was well-structured but to implement it in the context of rural schools was difficult. Lina, for example believed that the curriculum is "excellent". She admitted that it is "structured with clear instructions" and the fact that it "focuses on the four language skills helps students not to only focus on exams". She had positive views, particularly, on the "emphasis of listening and speaking skills, which had been overlooked in the previous curriculum". However, she also expressed her concern on "the students' proficiency level". Lina was "looking forward to using the new curriculum" but admitted that "it would be a difficult job to make my students understand all the topics".

Likewise, another participant, Umar, who had had less than 5 years of teaching experience believed that the curriculum was "up to date". He believed that "it exposes students to the world, so that they have more knowledge of other countries". Umar mentioned the "significance of the topics" in the textbook, believing that "students need to be aware of what is happening around the world". However, he expressed his "doubts and frustration on the lack of technological resources to assist me in implementing the curriculum". Umar showed his frustration "because to get a stable internet connection, is almost impossible unless you are teaching in urban locations". He discovered that the use of ICT and speakers is "more convenient if language rooms are pre-equipped with these technological devices rather than making teachers buying and carrying them into classrooms".

Another teacher, Aiman, is an English teacher who is also the ICT teacher. As such, he oversees the school's computer laboratory. He considered himself "lucky because I could use the LCD projector to display pictures I got from google when I tried to clarify meanings of complicated words". He admitted that "students who have low level of English proficiency, need help with visual representations of the contents". Using the internet, "it is slightly easier for me to teach the new English curriculum in the lab compared to a normal classroom". He commented that some of his friends from other rural schools are not as lucky as he is. The absence of a computer lab or a technologically integrated ESL classroom can "affect students' learning, especially when it comes to weak classes".

3.1.2 Theme 2: Negative Perceptions of Cultural Relevance and Insufficient Training

Among the nine teachers interviewed, three teachers had a negative impression of the curriculum and its implementation. As the textbook is not locally produced, one teacher, Fatin, believed that some of the contents are "irrelevant" to Malaysian cultures. It "takes more time for me to build up context for my students to see and relate their schemata to something that is foreign to them". She mentioned how "difficult" it was for her to carry out an activity from the textbook, where students are required to describe a picture of winter. As winter is not experienced in Malaysia, "low proficient, rural students do not have the appropriate vocabulary" to explain the picture well. For example, "they are not familiar with the words sledge, blizzard, fleece jacket, earmuffs and mittens", which are clearly used in the picture. In this case, "I have to do more preparation" before coming into the classroom. She admitted that "pictorial vocabulary assists the lesson" but the time spent preparing a pictorial vocabulary sheet can be "daunting".

Another big concern raised by teachers is the amount of training received. They believed that the ministry should "generously spend more on teacher's training courses in relation to the content and assessment of the new curriculum". Training should be handled by "experts rather than teacher colleagues who went for workshops". According to the teachers, when training sessions are administered by the experts, questions can be answered promptly. Currently, Malaysia adopts cascade model to disseminate the new curriculum. In cascade model, only a small number of teachers are trained, on the understanding that they will be training their colleagues in the things they have learnt. One of the immediate benefits is the ability to reach a large number of teachers within a short time (Bett & Boylan, 2016). However, despite being cost-effective, cascade model is not always the best solution in all cases. One of the most notable challenges is to ensure that the contents are not diluted or misinterpreted as it goes from one level to another (Alih et al., 2020). One teacher, Marsya, felt that the training was "insufficient" because it was only for four hours, given by a colleague who went for a five-day workshop.

In the CEFR training for Malaysian teachers, only a few selected master trainers are trained by the experts. These trainers are then in charge of training their colleagues through in-house training at their schools. Because teachers did not get first-hand input directly from the experts, the input that they have gotten from the master trainers might be different from one teacher to another and the input is also given based on the personal interpretation of the master trainers that may or may not be as it is on the first stage of training by the experts (Alih et al., 2020). For teachers who do not read the document, relying on interpretations from district officials and principals may cause them to understand the curriculum differently from the one intended by policymakers (Bush et al., 2018). Some teachers even feel neglected and discriminated against because they are not given equal opportunities to experience the training.

I am not the 'chosen one', so I don't go to training. I feel lost and blur sometimes. The one given by my colleague was more on how to write the lesson plans rather than using the textbook and assessment.

Marsya

The bureaucratic process has been identified as one of the reasons for the lack of training received. The government officials admitted that providing continuous training and workshops on CEFR to schoolteachers is a challenge, and they have yet to come up with solutions (Uri & Aziz, 2018). This is parallel to the findings when the participants mentioned time constraint and lack of qualified

CEFR trainers as some of the contributing factors to this issue. Sofia, who was chosen to attend professional training by the experts believed that depriving teachers of training leaves them *“puzzled and as a result, a great idea can be a failure in the implementation process”*. She believed that her training was *“useful and important”*. She recalled doing pre-lesson, lesson development and post lesson exercises during her five-day course and she was *“loaded with a lot of information”*. In fact, she felt *“sad”* for her colleagues who did not go for the course because when she was asked to give in-house training, it was *“too quick and ineffective”*.

To summarise, teachers' perceptions of the new CEFR curriculum reflect closely on how they see themselves as rural schoolteachers. Teachers may have positive impressions of the content of the curriculum, but students' proficiency levels and limited training provided raised doubt and uncertainty in the implementation process.

3.2 Research Question 2: Implementation of Change through Teaching Instructions

The observational data provided significant insights into how the implementation process was carried out in the classrooms. The data is presented in two parts, their classroom practices and the factors influencing the implementation of the new syllabus. Based on the series of observations, teachers' classroom practices can be categorized into (1) compliance in a traditional way (2) compliance but with improvisation.

3.2.1 Compliance in a Traditional Way

Compliant teachers are those who uphold the curriculum as a mandate (Goodson, 2001) and consider themselves as totally responsible for delivering the content of the curriculum. The textbook, as the enacted curriculum in the classroom, was rigidly used in every lesson. These teachers admitted that their lesson planning was focused on the *“delivery of the curriculum”*, rather than the students. They reflected that they were *“unable to slow down and follow the students' pace”* because they had to cover all the learning standards outlined in the syllabus. In fact, their lesson plans displayed the same instructions printed in the *“Teacher's Book”*. Their primary instructional strategies followed all the suggested activities and questions as how they were presented in the *“Teachers' Book”*. When they were asked about this, they explained that the book provided *“a sense of direction for them to teach although they felt lost sometimes”*. One of the teachers, Mahira, commented that some materials in the textbook are *“awkward and hard”*. She recalled her experience as quoted below:

Olive oil is not a familiar item in Malaysia, especially in rural areas, compared to the western countries. My students have difficulty comprehending the passage because it is quite loaded with high-level vocabulary. It is frustrating seeing them struggling reading the passage. However, I know I have no choice but to teach them the article.

It is interesting to note, however, that there is a discrepancy between what teachers know about the curriculum and what they actually do in the classroom. In the interview, teachers admitted that *“the new curriculum is more student-centred and focused on students”*. The fact that *“it gives teachers less control of the lesson and provides more circumstances for the students to take charge of their own learning is refreshing”*. However, what they tend to perceive disconnects with their content delivery. Instead of giving students time to hold discussions and group work, obviously as illustrated in the CEFR syllabus, some teachers engaged in a traditional approach of chalk and talk. The *“fear of losing control of the time and inability to cover all the topics”* in the syllabus were stated as the main reasons for their choice of traditional instructions.

3.2.2 Comply but Improvise

This category depicts how teachers can be both compliant and adaptive to the curriculum framework. What they did in the classroom was closely related to the levels of the students. Knowing that the new curriculum focuses on communicative competence, teachers gave more emphasis on listening and speaking skills compared to reading and writing. They gave students more time to familiarize themselves with listening and speaking activities. Lessons were more student-oriented while the textbook was more like a resource to create fun activities. One teacher, Sofia, explained that it was *“not easy to change my approaches as I had always initiated discussion and given out answers”* in the previous curriculum. However, she likes the changes now as she has less control over group work and classroom discussion. In her class, students are convinced to have more peer-interactions both inside and outside of classroom settings.

Hud, another teacher, who was observed, used a very clear student-centered approach in his lessons. The students were asked to research a lot of information on a topic by going to the library. They were to present a sketch on social issues, and he let the students discuss the contents and practice presenting their sketch in a non-threatening environment. Students were seen having a lot of fun, joking and acting in front of their class because of the method he chose. He explained that he wanted the students to *“know that English is supposed to be fun and learning it is a rewarding experience”*. However, when he taught his weak classes, his approach changed to chalk and talk. Most of the time students were copying from the board and reading a text aloud. Less physical activities were done because of language limitations. As students need more guidance, the use of mother-tongue was very apparent. He eventually improvised the lesson according to the ability of his students.

3.2.3 Factors Influencing the Implementation

Table 2 reports teachers' attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control over the implementation of the intended curriculum in the classrooms. The data was gathered from a series of observations carried out in the classrooms while teachers were teaching.

The observational data implies that teachers' behaviour in the classroom is controlled by both internal and external factors. Teachers' understanding of the documents is highly affected by the location of the school being rural with less proficient students.

Teachers were observed to integrate different forms of methods and approaches in the classroom, particularly at the beginning of the lessons, but the momentum was not sustained towards the end of the lessons.

Table 2

Observation data

| Factors influencing teaching instructions | Observation notes | Excerpts from the interview |
|--|---|---|
| Attitudes (Unfavourable or favourable) | <p>The observations reported that 4 teachers (Zarul, Lina, Fatin, Marsya) had an unfavourable attitude towards the CEFR-aligned syllabus. These teachers were reluctant to use the textbook, despite knowing that it represents the curriculum. Instead of giving opportunities for students to pose questions, opinions and suggestions in class, these teachers did not always allow time for them to do so. On the surface, activities like brainstorming, group work and dialogues were observed, but these did not encourage students to proactively sustain their participation during lessons.</p> | <p>Only teachers who teach rural schools understand the struggle. On paper it is perfect. You know, all the student-centred activities, but I can't even imagine how my students in the last class can hold a discussion about living in a small or big family in English. (Zarul)</p> <p>When you ask them to brainstorm ideas, they will always switch to Malay language, and I do not see any changes when this happens. I am still doing what I did in the last curriculum, spoon feeding them with answers. (Lina)</p> |
| | <p>On the contrary, favourable teachers maintained that their positive attitudes were the results of hope that this curriculum will make a difference and the fact that students were having some fun learning English in the classroom. These teachers followed the textbook covered all the tasks according to the lesson plans.</p> | <p>I think even if my students do not have the language to participate in class, my job is to encourage them. If I do not use the new curriculum, I feel it is a waste because it is definitely better than the previous one. (Mahira)</p> |
| Subjective Norms (teachers' behaviours being influenced by the school or students) | <p>School influence One teacher (Aiman) made students write emails using the computers and let them play around developing slides for presentation. The students were eager to participate and responded well to every instruction. It was an active and interesting class. However, the rest of the teachers believed that the schools have not supported them with the use of ICT or other equipment to use in class.</p> | <p>I do not have much problem with the curriculum because I am teaching in the computer lab. It is relevant with the changes made in the new curriculum as the use of ICT is more prominent compared to before. (Aiman)</p> <p>If the government wants me to use the new curriculum, buy good speakers, build more computer labs or at least the school should provide more resources like dictionaries or reference books. Otherwise, practically, it is not easy. (Fatin)</p> |
| | <p>Student influence Sofia was seen doing more collaborative work and let the students take their time in class. However, it was observed that some students did not contribute to the discussion, and this happened when she was teaching her weak classes. When she was in her good classes, lessons were more fast-paced, and she was able to complete her lesson plans.</p> | <p>I was excited when my students use the mini whiteboards in class. Even though I have to use my own money to buy them, it is okay because they are happy. (Sofia)</p> |
| Perceived Behavioural Control | <p>One teacher, Hud, was having a lot of fun in class. He used songs, role-play and very much student-centred activities as illustrated in the curriculum document. He sometimes used his own materials, but the topics were related to the textbook. He agreed that he was supposed to use the textbook but admitted his change of approach was to ensure that at least students learn something from the lessons.</p> | <p>You know that if you teach rural schools you need to change your approach. The curriculum is not tailored to their needs. You will feel the pressure if you follow everything. What I do is I change here and there to suit my students' levels. (Hud)</p> |

4.0 DISCUSSION

This paper examines rural teachers' perceptions of the curriculum reform in Malaysia and how they are manifested into classroom instructions. Data gathered from the interview indicated that teachers' behaviour in the classroom is highly influenced by external factors like students' proficiency level and the location of the schools, which is consistent with Ajzen's TPB. It is therefore significant to note that if teachers perceive a change as being outside of their control, however positive their attitude towards it, they may not implement the change (Bai, 2020).

In the context of this study, the findings show that these rural schoolteachers have not been given due consideration in the process of curriculum development. One of the challenges faced by rural schoolteachers is to represent the needs of rural students when a new reform takes place. This is because teacher involvement is crucial to effective curriculum reform (Tikkanen et al., 2020). However, in a centralized, mandated curriculum reform, teachers are only seen as implementers rather than developers. Instead, rural schoolteachers should be consulted and heard in the process of policy formation for it to be customized according to the locations of the schools. Not just that, there should be a possible channel be made available for these rural schoolteachers to give their feedback of the new reform so that realistic changes can be made to the operational aspects of the curriculum reform.

Another challenge for the rural schoolteachers is to implement the curriculum when centralization has not allowed them to be flexible with their lesson plans. Teachers are having difficulty adapting to some lessons which are considered high level for students at rural schools. To make things worse, teachers are frustrated over the lack of technological infrastructure in rural schools and principals who lack awareness and support for the teachers and the curriculum reform. Compared to urban schools, teachers from rural schools are not privileged with technological resources which are pertinent in teaching and learning processes. As mentioned in Yunus and Ang (2021), English lesson could be conducted better with technologically enhanced ESL classroom.

Training inadequacy is another main concern raised by teachers in the study. Some teachers interviewed and observed admitted that they do not really understand the framework. This is supported by a study done by Mohamad Khair and Mohd Shah (2021) which illustrated that most teachers in schools are still unaware of the framework and have little interest in learning how to adopt the framework in their lessons. For a constructive dissemination of the new curriculum and to avoid saturation of information, training should be given by qualified CEFR trainers. Theoretically, this study refines the six different responses to curriculum change forwarded by Adamson and Davison (2003). Instead of standing as an individual response in isolation, the possibility for two different responses occurring simultaneously has not been explicitly explained. Teachers in this study may experience compliance as a response to curriculum change, but there are also teachers who experience compliance and accommodation at the same time.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, CEFR adoption in Malaysia has made notable progress over recent years, reflecting strong policy support and ongoing curriculum reforms. Teachers' professional development, evidence-based curriculum design and effective assessment practices are key factors in successful implementation (Kuek & Lin, 2025; Mohamad Marzaini et al., 2025; Sukri et al., 2025). While challenges remain particularly in teacher preparedness, resource availability and alignment between policy and practice, recent studies demonstrate that targeted interventions can address these issues effectively. The Malaysian experience also emphasizes the value of contextual adaptation. Lessons from regional counterparts, such as Thailand, show that CEFR frameworks must be interpreted flexibly to match local classroom realities (Sriwongsa & Sukying, 2024). Overall, continued investment in teacher training, curriculum development, and assessment alignment will be essential to fully realize the potential of CEFR in enhancing English language proficiency across all educational levels.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Normala Sulaiman (The author was solely responsible for all aspects of the work and approved the final manuscript.)

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