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Patterns of Relationships in North-South Higher Education Partnerships: A Pathway to Mutuality

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Abstract: This study examines the patterns of relationships in North-South higher education partnerships, emphasizing the experiences and perspectives of the Southern partner. Employing a comparative case study design, the research explores two cases of partnerships between universities in Ethiopia and Norway, involving interviews with 40 participants as well as a review of relevant documents. The analysis maps out how the partnerships are formed and functioning, comparing the two cases in terms of the positioning and agency of the Southern partners. The findings indicate that North-South higher education partnerships are shaped not only by structural factors but also by context-specific elements embedded in the local environments. These context-embedded factors are found to be crucial for challenging the problematic consequences of inherent asymmetries in the partnerships and, thus, for paving the way for more mutual collaborations.

Keywords: higher education; partnership; North-South higher education partnership; mutuality; Ethiopia; higher education partnership

Introduction

Ethiopia has a long history of traditional education linked to the Orthodox Church and Islamic Mosques (Bishaw & Melesse, 2017). However, the modern Western-style higher education system in Ethiopia has a shorter history of about seven decades, with the establishment of the University College of Addis Ababa (now Addis Ababa University) in 1950. Besides, the expansion and development of higher education remained slow until the 2000s. However, over the last three decades, the Ethiopian government has undertaken tremendous reforms in higher education to produce competent graduates who can help transform Ethiopia into a middle-income country by 2025 (Teferra et al., 2018). Several reform initiatives have been undertaken, including the expansion of higher education institutions (HEIs), the implementation of successive Education Sector Development Programs, the enactment of the Higher Education Proclamation, the establishment of the Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency and Higher Education Strategic Center, the introduction of cost-sharing and privatization measures, the diversification of academic programs, and others (Kassie, 2020).

These reforms have resulted in a massive expansion of higher education and improved access. For instance, the number of universities has increased from just two in 1996 to 60 today, and undergraduate student enrolment has increased from 56,072 in 2003 to 825,003 in 2018 (Ministry of Education, 2018). This expansion has also presented a number of challenges, including shortages of skilled faculty, resource constraints, limited research and innovation capacities, high graduate unemployment, and declining overall quality (Bishaw & Melesse, 2107). These challenges have hindered the sector's ability to fully support Ethiopia's aspirations of becoming a middle-income country by 2025. In response, Ethiopian higher education has pursued international partnerships to address such issues of strengthening research capacities and improving educational qualities.

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Given that North-South higher education partnerships (HEPs) have emerged as a strategy to revitalize African higher education, many Ethiopian HEIs have established partnerships with various Northern counterparts. These partnerships are often supported by the development partners. For example, the development agencies of Norway, Sweden, and the USA are among the key players that have provided financial and technical support to such partnerships in Ethiopia (Teferra, 2014).

This study focuses on examining international HEP experiences in Ethiopia, using two partnership programs formed between Ethiopian and Norwegian universities. The selection of partnerships with Norwegian HEIs is due to their extensive partnership history of over 30 years with Ethiopian HEIs (Nossum, 2017). Additionally, these partnerships represent North-South relations that lead to a question of power relations, while Norway's professed motivation for development assistance is humanitarianism (Hydén, 2017; Ishengoma, 2016). Yet, it is not known how far this claim practically conforms to and opens up spaces for the Southern institutions to exercise a relationship that transcends asymmetry.

The concept of partnership typically implies a positive and collaborative relationship, characterized by mutually agreed-upon arrangements that benefit all parties involved (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Hanada, 2021). It is built upon the premise of mutual influence, co-ownership, joint decisions, mutual respect and trust, and mutual benefits. However, the extent to which such North-South HEPs embody equitable participation and mutual influence remains uncertain.

Broadly speaking, the literature on North-South HEPs reflects both positive and negative depictions. While an array of studies highlight the existence of power asymmetries inherent in these partnerships (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Lumb, 2023; Ishengoma, 2016), others argue for the potential symmetry and mutual influence within North-South partnerships (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Leng, 2016; Mwangi, 2017). The positive view emphasizes the benefits of international partnerships as catalysts for higher education development. Studies within this category emphasize the enhancement of academic and research capacity and knowledge exchange (Jamil & Haque, 2017; Jooste, 2015; Koehn & Obamba, 2014). They portray the potential for equitable influence through genuine negotiation and consensus among partners. However, these studies tend to downplay the role of structural power dynamics in shaping relationships.

Conversely, another category of literature displays skepticism towards partnership premises, painting a negative or gloomier picture. Studies within this category often analyze North-South partnership dynamics from the perspective of structural factors (Ishengoma, 2016; Lumb, 2023). They view these partnerships as subtle forms of power imposition, serving to legitimize the role of Northern development agencies in directing the relationship. According to these studies, partnership programs often operate within a neo-colonial framework, leading to dependency on Southern partners, the dominance of Northern interests, and distortion of local agendas. For instance, Luthuli, Daniel and Corbin (2024) argue that North-South partnerships frequently carry colonial legacies. From this perspective, the promise of egalitarianism within the partnership is challenged by the inherent North-South asymmetries and paternalistic behaviors exhibited by Northern academics (Ishengoma, 2016; Luthuli et al, 2024). Such studies tend to overestimate the hegemony of political and economic structures in shaping partnership dynamics.

However, it is my contention that international HEPs are not necessarily uniformly established and operated, nor do they exhibit the same patterns. The actual context (Ledger & Kawalilak, 2020) plays a crucial role in envisioning some ways that transcend structural asymmetries. Nonetheless, the majority of studies in this field are rooted in Northern perspectives and authored by Northern scholars (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Kot, 2016). There is a notable dearth of research exploring the viewpoints of Southern partners and the extent to which their voices contribute to shaping and sustaining partnerships that can work within the tenacious asymmetries of power (Koehn & Obamba, 2014; Kot, 2016). Furthermore, despite the prevalence of partnerships between Ethiopian HEIs and Northern counterparts, there is a limited availability of empirical studies (e.g., Kassie & Angervall, 2021) and agency-sponsored evaluation reports (e.g., Francisconi, Grundy & Mulloy, 2011).

Therefore, this study focuses on the experiences of Southern partners in North-South HEPs involving two Ethiopian universities, referred to as UA and UB, and a Norwegian university, referred to as NU. The study centers on two partnership programs (UA-NU and UB-NU) to investigate the patterns of relationships exhibited vis-à-vis issues of mutuality, based on the perspectives of the local partners. Specifically, the study aims to explore: (a) the formation and functioning of these partnerships; (b) the Southern partners' experiences within these partnerships, in light of their positioning; and (c) compares the degree of mutuality exhibited in the two partnerships, exploring how their distinct contextual factors may account for any variations observed.

The contribution of this study is that without ignoring the structural conception of North-South relations, it incorporates context-specific factors to enhance the understanding of the intricate nature of partnerships and to highlight potential avenues for challenging the problematic consequences of power asymmetries. It also provides implications, particularly for promoting mutuality within partnerships.

Theoretical Framework

While different actors within the global power structure may assume dominant or subordinate roles, it is important to recognize that this structure does not offer a completely deterministic explanation of international relations due to the heterogeneity and constant evolution of societies (Ledger & Kawalilak, 2020). Consequently, analyzing a specific international partnership requires a critical awareness not only of the historically embedded political and economic relations that contribute to asymmetries but also of contextual sensitivity. Of particular importance, this study focuses on partnerships supported by the Norwegian Development Agency (NORAD), which envisions shared responsibility and mutual relationships between Norwegian and African universities (Norad, 2017; Nossum, 2017). Therefore, the mutuality lens (Galtung, 1980; Hayhoe, 1986) is considered an appropriate theoretical framework for comprehending the patterns of relations in these partnerships. Mutuality is regarded as the antithesis of domination (Galtung, 1980) and is recognized as a crucial aspect of the relationship. Hayhoe (1986) adapted Galtung's structural-oriented goals of international relations, including equity, participation, autonomy, and solidarity, as a means to reduce power differentials and foster mutuality in international cooperation. Scholars such as Leng (2016), Leng and Pan (2013), and Mwangi (2017) have also employed the mutuality lens in studying North-South HEPs.

In the context of North-South HEPs, *equity* emphasizes the collaborative formulation of partnership arrangements and objectives, with joint agreement and consensus among the partners. Equity supports collaborative decision-making, shared responsibilities, and mutual benefits (Hayhoe, 1986; Leng, 2016). *Participation* advocates for the full engagement and contribution of the Southern partner in the partnership, rejecting restrictions and hierarchical relations (Hayhoe, 1986; Mwangi, 2017). *Autonomy highlights* the importance of partners respecting each other's values, norms, and working cultures (Mwangi, 2017). This necessitates the Northern partners' acknowledgement of the contributions made by the Southern partner and the benefits derived from the partnership (Leng, 2016). *Solidarity* suggests partnership forms that foster strong interactions between partners and facilitate further interconnections among the Southern partners and members (Leng, 2016). Thus, the framework of mutuality is employed as a lens to comparatively examine the two partnerships, focusing on the roles and positioning of the Southern partners in shaping the relationship.

Design and Method

This study employs a comparative case study design. This design is helpful for an in-depth understanding of the experiences of the two partnerships, treating each as a case (Yin, 2011), and for better understanding the subtle differences between them (Bryman, 2012). From a pool of 11 partnerships involving universities from Ethiopia and Norway, two specific partnership programs, namely UA-NU and UB-NU, were selected as representative cases (Mwangi, 2017). The selection

criteria were based on contextual similarities and differences. Both partnerships involved 'first generation' universities (UA and UB) that were assumed to have more extensive partnership experience, focused on capacity building, funded by NORAD, and had similar project durations from 2013 to 2020. These cases were deemed comparable due to their shared goals (Goodrick, 2014) and commonalities in terms of data sources and constructs (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002). However, they differed in partnership areas, activities, and institutional capacity, which may or may not account for variations in their relationship patterns.

The study employed semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected group of 40 individuals who possessed significant experience in the partnerships, comprising 20 participants from each case. The participants included six administrators, 18 academics, and 16 graduate students (12 PhD and two Master's students). The interviews with administrators focused on their roles in initiating, scrutinizing, and approving the partnerships. Interviews with academics delved into their perspectives on their roles and experiences in the partnerships relative to their foreign counterparts. The interviews with graduate students focused on their personal experiences and the benefits they derived from the partnerships. The study also employed a review of documents, such as memoranda of understanding (MOUs), agreements, partnership proposals (of UA-NU and UB-NU), progress reports, and meeting minutes.

To establish trustworthiness, the study collected thick descriptive data and converging evidence from multiple data sources (principals, instructors, students, and documents) using two different methods: semi-structured interview and document review (Bryman, 2012). The interview data were then complemented by the review of relevant documents.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves constructing an index of central themes and subthemes, identifying emerging themes through reading and rereading, and categorizing them accordingly (Bryman, 2012). First, the documents were reviewed to extract information regarding partnership objectives, activities, funding sources, partners' roles and responsibilities, contributions, progress, achievements, and challenges. This document analysis revealed several themes, including partnership initiation, formation, and functioning, which provided an overall understanding of the key concerns of the study. The interview data were then integrated with the document data and coded according to the themes identified during the document review.

The process involved single case analysis—exploring and describing the findings of each case within the context of the emerged themes—followed by cross-case analysis—synthesizing the results across the two cases and comparing them by juxtaposing.. Finally, employing the constant comparison method (Yin, 2011), the data were coded with respect to the constructs of equity, autonomy, solidarity, and participation, which emerged from the theoretical framework and interview guides. This allowed the study to identify similarities and nuances between the cases vis-à-vis issues of mutuality. Specific interviews are referenced using a number following UA and UB, denoting the respective universities.

Findings

This section provides the results, first presenting the overview of the two partnership programs, juxtaposed (see Appendix A), followed by a cross-case analysis.

How are the Partnerships Initiated and Formed?

The results show that previous institutional and personal ties as well as NORAD's call for funding contributed to the initiation of the UA-NU partnership, while prior personal relationships and NORAD's call for funding were linked to the initiation of the UB-NU partnership. As the then coordinator in UA responded:

Our relationship with [NU] professors started earlier in a research partnership where we worked together… They informed us about NORAD's announcement of funding applications. Then, we contacted them and discussed the development of a joint proposal and application for funding (UA5).

A coordinator in UB also described:

Prior to this partnership, there was a capacity-building partnership between [UB] and the U.S. institution, where I from [UB] and a professor from the U.S. (now a coordinator of this partnership in the Norwegian side) were members. It was at that time we discussed the possibilities of partnering. Later, through our initiation, our respective officials signed MOUs for working in partnership (UB25).

An administrator from UB added:

After MOUs and in response to NORAD's call for a seed grant application, we jointly applied for the seed grant. In late 2012, we won the seed grant. Using this grant, we identified our institutional needs and developed the partnership proposal; and again in 2013, we won the NORAD's main grant (UB23).

In both cases, faculty members from local partner institutions with prior links with their counterparts in foreign partner institutions initiated initial contacts and discussions regarding the possibilities for institutional partnerships. These individuals were subsequently appointed as coordinators within their respective institutions. These prior personal and institutional connections served as seed stock for the initiation and emergence of new partnerships, as also noted in Taylor (2016). These connections were particularly helpful in establishing initial awareness and understanding of the partners' interest in forming partnerships and signing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs). However, it is important to note that in both cases, the decision to conduct needs assessments, identify partnership agendas, and develop partnership proposals was prompted by NORAD's call for applications. Interviewees (e.g., UA15 and UB37) also emphasized that securing external funding was a prerequisite for implementing the MOUs and carrying out the projects, which would have otherwise remained unrealized. The UB-NU partnership proposal (p. 3) also highlighted the role of NORAD's Seed Grant in supporting the "…need assessment and development of the proposal", indicating that while prior connections were significant at the initial stage, a call for external funding appeared to be played a decisive role for deciding proposal development and thus for establishing the partnerships.

Many participants in both cases mentioned that their institutions often partner with the Northern institutions. One reason for this is the expectation that working with the Northern partners, owing to their better status and experience, would give them a better opportunity for learning and achieving their capacity-building goals (UA1). Another reason is the desire to secure "*external funding for running the partnership projects*", as it is often through collaborations with Northern partners that funding is obtained (UB29). Participants frequently praised the financial contributions of Norway, which supported the organization of consultative meetings and exchange visits to enhance understanding of each other's needs and contributions. These communication activities were deemed "…instrumental for the partnership formation…" (UA-NU proposal, p. 4) and were valued for "broadening the liaison between" partners (UB-NU proposal, p. 3).

In addition, several participants mentioned that they were given the autonomy to assess and identify the needs of their institutions that could be addressed through the partnership. For example, an academic staff member from UA stated, "*They requested our interests and needs, we told them, then they accepted us with slight modifications*" (UA5). Similarly, it is described that NU gave precedence to the demands of UB.

First, the selected staff from our institution identified the partnership agendas and developed the draft partnership proposal. Then, the draft proposal was presented in the meeting, where other academics and institutional leaders of both parties participated by providing feedback. Accordingly, the proposal was modified. Finally, institutional leaders approved and signed the agreement (UB29).

In both cases, the local partners participated in identifying issues of local relevance, writing proposals, vetting the processes, and signing agreements (UA18, UA4, UB37, UB36). As such the partnership proposals entertain the needs of the local partners. Both the interview and the document indicated that the partnerships focused on building the capacity of the local institution through graduate training, joint research, curriculum design, and short-term training. The proposals, in both cases, also underlined the shortage of academic staff and resources in the local partners, which the partnerships are supposed to address. Hence, the partnership initiation and formation in both cases seem to have demonstrated a practice, somewhat, different from the traditional partnerships which are often initiated externally by the Northern partners (Ishengoma, 2016).

In both cases, NORAD did not directly participate in the construction and execution of the partnerships. Yet, the two case studies show that the partnership building was also in consideration of NORAD's requirements and procedures, which contributed to shaping partners' roles in setting agendas, goals, and activities, and in sharing roles and responsibilities. As a funding body, NORAD invited interested Southern and Norwegian universities to establish partnerships and apply for funding awards. The selection of proposals was, undeniably, linked to NORAD's criteria, such as relevance to NORAD's objectives and thematic areas, local institution's needs and capacity, gender inclusiveness and equity, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness (Norad, n.d. pp. 10-11, 17). Participants from both UA and UB viewed most of these criteria as worthwhile in entertaining local priorities and balancing partners' roles while considering some others as sponsor stipulations that tend to distort local priorities. They raised concerns that NORAD's focus on gender equity has influenced the local partners to include the recruitment of 50% female PhD candidates as part of the partnership project. For example, UB30 emphasized that although the gender issue was in line with their institutional needs, this recruitment procedure did not conform with the existing context, as female academics with MA degrees were scarce "*let alone those who were suitable for PhD candidate*." The inclusion of female recruitment in the UA-NU partnership was also described as linked to the local partner's desire to win the grant.

Although the foreign partner encourages you to design a project that meets your priorities, you also need to consider the funding body's priorities to compete for and win the funding. Or else you may lose competition (UA7).

As gender equity, particularly in academic positions, is a salient problem in many African HEIs, including Ethiopia (Kassie, 2018; Teferra et al., 2018), it is commendable that NORAD's requirements and incentives have positively influenced the Southern partners (UA & UB) to implement such female recruitment procedures. However, this practice is limited to NORAD-supported projects. According to the interviews, if the local partners truly valued this recruitment procedure, it would have been implemented across all programs. Instead, it remained as a slack appendage to specific partnerships solely to access NORAD's funding, without bringing about substantial institutional reforms. Although the Norwegians granted the local partners autonomy in identifying their needs, the local partners were well aware of Norway's strong emphasis on gender equity and felt compelled to prioritize it over their own urgent needs and priorities. This reflects the influence of conditionality-attached funding in shaping partnership agendas (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Ishengoma, 2016).

The two cases also revealed that the allocation of responsibilities between partners was determined through discussions and agreements, taking into account qualifications and experiences. For example, UB25 stated, "*All arrangements and decisions are based on mutual agreements*." Yet,

the agreement was based on the assumption that the local staff would take on leading roles in tasks they were capable of, while the foreign staff would take the lead in tasks beyond the capabilities of the [local partner] (UA5). As a result, partners in both cases assumed joint and individual responsibilities, as summarized in Appendix A. Accordingly, the allegedly more experienced NU staff, for the most part, was assigned to play mentoring and supporting roles, empowering the local staff through knowledge-sharing, capacity-building training, and providing access to educational resources. On the other hand, the local partners' comparatively lower qualifications and experience positioned them as in need of their Norwegian partners' assistance. Participants unanimously expressed their lack of academic and research capacity and experience as the primary reason for engaging in the partnerships. For example, UA9 stated, "... *[the Norwegian partners] are far more advanced than us, and we need to learn from them... adopt their work*." Hence, it appears that the apparent difference in qualifications and experience has continued to shape the positioning of partners and has posed challenges to achieving equity in the distribution of roles and responsibilities (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Menashy, 2018).

Although the two cases shared many similarities, they also revealed differences in the balance of the distribution of roles and responsibilities between partners. The UA-NU partnership, compared to the UB-NU partnership, exhibited a more balanced distribution of roles. This can be attributed to variations in partnership modalities and activities employed (see Appendix B). In the UA-NU partnership, the main activities included PhD training, joint research, community engagement, short-term training, and MA curriculum design. The PhD program was hosted by the local partner (UA), where professors from both UA and NU collaborated in teaching courses and providing supervision. UA members, like their NU colleagues, were assigned to be involved in all other partnership activities. On the other hand, the primary activities in the UB-NU partnership were "sandwich" PhD and MPhil programs, short-term training, and MPhil curriculum design. The sandwich model offered scholarships to UB students for studying at both NU and UB. Consequently, NU was responsible for running the PhD program, including admissions, degree awards, course offerings, and supervision. This was due to the lack of UB staff with the necessary qualifications to run PhD training (UB26). Furthermore, unlike the UA-NU partnership, no joint-research in the UB-NU partnership could "... *involve local faculty members and contribute to research capacity-building [at UB]*" (UB21). As a result, UB members had limited participation compared to their NU counterparts, indicating an asymmetric distribution of roles.

The study further showed that the development of the UA-NU partnership followed a bottom-up path. The partnership was formed and operated at the departmental level (operating academic unit), where members were actively "*involved in the partnership establishment*" from initiation through design to implementation (UA6). On the other hand, the UB-NU partnership appeared to follow a top-down approach, with the selection and design of partnership activities taking place at the college level. The involvement of operating units, such as departments, in certain partnership activities was minimal. Participants, including an administrator (UB21), often claimed that the UB-NU partnership was conceptualized and designed at the college level by the respective heads "*without the active participation of department members*". This resulted in a relatively lower role and level of involvement of operating members at UB in the planning process compared to UA. Given that the focus of the partnership is capacity building of the local partner, the limited participation of local partner members may hinder knowledge transfer and undermine capacity-building efforts (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019; Ishengoma, 2016).

How are the Partnerships Functioning?

The two case studies have indicated that the success of the operation process largely depends on the initial partnership conceptualization and building stage. An interesting example is the MPhil program, which was proposed "*without sufficient involvement and agreement from the [operating] department*" (UB30), and has remained impractical (UB-NU Progress report, p.7). The interview also

revealed a disagreement between the academics and the coordinator regarding the relevance of this program. While the coordinator emphasized its relevance for addressing research gaps arguing that "it is research-driven", the academics argued that joint research would have been preferable to the MPhil program for enhancing research skills and experience. Such partnerships that lack common understanding among members regarding detailed contents and activities tend to be unsuccessful (Sutton & Obst, 2011).

A subtle distinction was observed between the two cases regarding the roles played by the local partners in recruiting PhD candidates. In the UA-NU partnership, the recruitment of PhD students was "*primarily, carried out by [UA]*" (UA4). On the other hand, in the UB-NU partnership, although UB participated in the recruitment process, candidates were "*scrutinized as per NU's admission criteria*" (UB25). Consequently, the UA-NU partnership seems to have granted the local partner a more significant role, thereby promoting local ownership. Conversely, the selection and admission criteria employed by the foreign partners in the UB-NU partnership are perceived as upholding international standards.

Regarding financial administration, the two cases reflect a departure from the traditional North-South partnership, where control over project finances typically rests with the Northern partner (Ishengoma, 2016; Teferra, 2014). Instead, the partnerships exhibited a slightly different practice that involved local actors in financial administration and management. As stated in the partnership agreements, NORAD disburses funds to the partners based on agreed-upon financial needs, upon request by the recipient (local partner). The recipient assumes "administrative responsibilities for allocating its share, accounting for the funds, and reporting transactions to NORAD" (UB-NU Partnership Agreement, p.2). This approach was recognized and appreciated by participants (e.g., UA14 and UB24) as it introduced a certain level of equity in fund distribution and control. Additionally, participants highlighted the flexibility in budget allocation by NORAD when necessary (UA6). For instance, both partnerships were able to extend their funding periods by two years to complete delayed activities. However, the issue of financial administration and control remained a subject of debate. One administrator argued that while NU is not delegated as a gatekeeper of the project finance, "*it is still under the control of NORAD*" (UA1). An academic staff member added, "*Your expenditure needs to be in the budget line, and you need to report to NORAD*" (UB22). On one hand, this reflects a greater level of budget control by the funding body, which can place the local partners in a dependent position (Alemu, 2019). On the other hand, such practices can be seen as promoting transparency and accountability in budget utilization.

The study also revealed unbalanced fund distribution, favoring the foreign partner. According to the UB-NU and UA-NU agreements, the foreign partner retained 79% of the partnership budget for UB-NU and 63% for UA-NU. This disparity in fund allocation between the two cases may be due to the major activities of the UB-NU partnership being overseen by NU staff, whose compensation was costly, and the absence of joint research that could have brought more budgets to the local partner.

The study also shed light on the challenges and tensions associated with financial administration. Some of these were attributable to internal issues within the local institutions, such as undue bureaucracy and weak financial management, which "*resulted in procurement delays*" (UB35). This aligns with the rigid procurement systems observed in Ethiopian universities (Teferra et al., 2018). Other challenges arose from inconsistencies in practices and systems between the local institutions and NORAD's requirements. For instance, the auditing, financial transaction, and reporting systems mandated by NORAD were deemed difficult to integrate into the local contexts, leading to delays in disbursements (UA11, UB28).

Another important point highlighted in both cases was the key role of academics in establishing and leveraging the partnership, as observed in previous studies (Bordogna, 2017; Gieser, 2016). It was observed that coordinators shouldered the majority of responsibilities within the partnership and played a key role in negotiations, design, and decision-making. One administrator underscored the [UB] coordinator's "*lack of commitment and leadership skills*" (UB2) as contributing to the failure of the MPhil program and other limitations within the UB-NU partnership. It appears that

the relationship in the partnership and its success depended much on the individual personalities and leadership qualities.

The interview further revealed that several academics (e.g., UB27, UB29, UB33, UA10, UA12, UA8) do not view their Norwegian colleagues as 'partners' working towards mutual benefits, but rather as 'supporters'. Nonetheless, they still regard the relationship as generally positive and conducive to enhancing the capacity building of the local partners. To quote one of the academics' comments: "*The [NU] members are assisting us to achieve our capacity development goals*" (UA8). It appears that the partnerships are viewed as acts of benevolence aimed at assisting the allegedly low-profiled Southern partners, rather than as opportunities for mutual benefits (Koehn & Obamba, 2014).

The partnership projects were subject to monitoring and evaluation on both a formative and summative basis. These practices were deemed valuable for identifying gaps, obtaining feedback, and making necessary adjustments. The formative monitoring and evaluation practices were generally perceived as inclusive for both parties. However, asymmetrical tendencies were reported, with summative evaluations being "*conducted by an evaluation team representing NORAD*" (UA3), while the involvement of local partners was limited to providing data and comments on the evaluation results. Participants further asserted that the evaluation and progress reporting were based on performance indicators and report templates predominantly designed by NORAD.

> *What contents to be evaluated and in what formats to be reported are already indicated in the template provided by NORAD. It is based on this template that we prepare the progress reports (UB24).*

A review of the progress reports revealed a notable emphasis on the partnership outcomes and benefits for the local partners while overlooking those pertaining to the foreign partner. Indicators or anticipated benefits for the Norwegian partners appeared to fall outside the scope of the monitoring and evaluation process. This disregard for considering the "costs and benefits to Northern higher education partners..." reflects asymmetry in the evaluation framework (Koehn & Uitto, 2015, p.4).

Discussions

This study aims to examine and map the patterns of North-South Higher Education Partnership (HEP) development, focusing on the experiences and positioning of local partners. By comparing two cases, the study seeks to gain a better understanding of the nuances and draw lessons that can foster mutuality.

Overall, the study reveals both aspects of mutuality, such as equity, participation, autonomy, and solidarity, as well as challenges counteracting its realization, with variations between the two cases. Regarding equity, NORAD advocates for a North-South HEP that promotes mutuality and equity. The Norwegian partners emphasized reducing power differentials by involving local partners in the initiation, planning, and decision-making processes. Although the extent of involvement varied across the cases, the local partners played a role in shaping partnership agendas, setting objectives, and sharing roles and responsibilities. This inclusion of Southern inputs signifies the incorporation of equity in the partnership programs. Importantly, participants highlighted that major partnership arrangements and practices were based on discussions and mutual agreements between partners, aligning with the notion of equity (Hayhoe, 1986; Leng, 2016).

Another aspect of equity acknowledged by academics was being credited as the first authors and editors in joint publications. This differs from common practices in North-South research partnerships where Southern scholars often assume roles as assistants or local facilitators (Jamil & Haque, 2017; Halvorsen, 2017).

However, the study also reveals challenges that relegate local partners to a subordinate position. While goals and activities were agreed upon through mutual agreements, the focus persisted on

the capacity building of the local partners. Such partnerships often emphasize supporting Southern partners by the Northern partners (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019). This unbalanced perceived benefit positions the local partners as the primary beneficiaries of the partnership. Participants mentioned various benefits that the partnership brought to the local partners, such as academic and research capacity growth, funding, and new international linkages. Evaluation practices were also limited to assessing the results and benefits achieved by the local partners. Yet, as participants commented, the partnerships were also beneficial to the Norwegian partners, to the least in terms of exposure to the Southern academic environment (e.g., Teferra, 2014). These factors reflect an inequitable positioning that undermines the contribution of the local partners and the partnership with the Northern partners (Koehn & Uitto, 2015; Luthuli et al, 2024).

Furthermore, some of NORAD's requirements were noted to undermine the negotiating power of the local partners, challenging equity between partners. Notably, NORAD's funding was linked to gender mainstreaming, which sometimes compromised the local partners' priorities. Such involvement of the funding agency in North-South partnerships often poses equity challenges (Menashy, 2018).

In terms of participation, the active involvement of partner members from the initiation and planning stage is argued to garner their buy-in and maintain the partnerships on track, while their exclusion erodes their sense of ownership and hampers partnership functioning (Helms, 2015). This study reveals that members from the local partners have been involved in partnership development to varying degrees across the cases. For example, PhD students (in both cases) and faculty members (in UA) have published joint research in international journals. This contribution of the local partners to knowledge production reflects the tenet of participation in mutuality (Hayhoe, 1986). However, due to differences in partnership modalities, paths, activities, and capacities of the local partners, the UA-NU partnership exhibited a slightly higher degree of local partner participation compared to the UB-NU partnership.

The UA-NU partnership, following a bottom-up establishment approach, provided more opportunities for active engagement in partnership development for operating members compared to the UB-NU partnership, which followed a top-down approach. In the UA-NU partnership, members from both parties participated in the initial meetings, proposing project ideas, planning, and implementation. On the other hand, the involvement of local partners in the UB-NU partnership was relatively limited. The major activities of the UB-NU "sandwich" program were primarily conducted by the Norwegians, with minimal participation from the UB side due to a lack of qualified staff. In contrast, the UA-NU "at-home" partnership involved both parties. UA's relatively stronger staff capacity in managing PhD training positioned them to play a more substantial role and participate actively in the partnership. The presence of joint research in the UA-NU partnership also facilitated the involvement of more local academics. As such, research-driven activities were perceived as more conducive to increasing the participation level of local academics at various qualification levels. Thus, compared to the UA-NU partnership, the UB-NU partnership exhibited more asymmetry.

Autonomy emphasizes mutual respect for contributions and needs (Hayhoe, 1986). In this study, local academics and students highly appreciated the respect and autonomy given to them by their Norwegian colleagues and advisors during their collaboration. The local partners were encouraged to propose partnership projects that held local relevance, highlighting a commitment to autonomy. However, the study also reveals a perception that the Norwegian partners, while not seeking a dominant position, were regarded as a source of knowledge and expertise within the partnerships (Mwangi, 2017). They were seen as more experienced deserving the role of mentors and patrons to the local partners. In contrast, the local partners were viewed as lacking in such expertise, often relegated to facilitating and providing information on the local environment and context. Consequently, while members of the local partners exhibited a strong desire to learn and gain knowledge and academic experience from their Norwegian counterparts, the Norwegians appeared to show less interest in acquiring knowledge from the local partners. This dynamic reinforces a

unidirectional transfer of knowledge from North to South, which poses challenges to ensuring the mutuality tenet of autonomy (Jooste, 2015; Mwangi, 2017).

The study also uncovered practices that disadvantage the local norms and practices. Specifically, it was observed that local partners were expected to adhere to NORAD-driven accounting and reporting systems, procedures, and performance indicators, with limited input from the local partners. This practice runs counter to autonomy, which necessitates the consideration of the working cultures and norms of the local partners (Leng, 2016).

The two cases also demonstrated varying degrees of solidarity in terms of strengthening interconnections and providing support to the partnerships. Both partnerships established linkages with other international projects, allowing for collaborative training, workshops, conferences, and additional resource support. Additionally, the local partners in both cases were able to form new partnerships with other local institutions, showcasing aspects of solidarity (Leng, 2016).

However, the UA-NU partnership displayed a stronger degree of interpersonal relationships and community engagement compared to the UB-NU partnership. Involvement in joint research and co-advising was valued in fostering solidarity within the UA-NU partnership. The UA-NU partnership's community engagement activities were also praised for strengthening interconnections with the local community. In contrast, the UB academics' engagement is limited to relatively fewer activities in the UB-NU partnership compared to the UA-NU partnership. Consequently, the degree of interaction between partner members in the UB-NU partnership seems more constrained. It appears that these differences in the nature of partnership activities account for variations in degrees of solidarity observed between the two partnerships (Mwangi, 2017)

Conclusions and Implications

In the context of North-South relations, power asymmetry—an imbalance of power, resources, and influence between parties, rooted in broader contextual factors—is often unavoidable (Andriansen & Madsen, 2019). Consequently, it can be argued that power dynamics would shape the relationships between the Norwegian and Ethiopian HEIs. Nonetheless, despite this reality, the context gives ground for the relationship dynamics. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of recognizing the inherent power differentials and offers insights into how these partnerships can transcend asymmetry and move towards mutuality.

The two case studies have demonstrated various structural factors that constrained the role and participation of the Southern partners, albeit to different degrees. For instance, the scarcity of local resources led to the dependence on external funding, which often resulted in the selection of Northern partners. Additionally, differences in academic and research capacity played a role in shaping the partnership objectives towards capacity building for the Southern partners. These capacity differences also contributed to imbalances in roles and financial distributions, favoring the Northern partners. The study further revealed the influence of the funding body's interests in shaping partnership agendas. Undoubtedly, power structures are entrenched in such partnerships and may continue to be obstacles to achieving mutuality.

However, even in such circumstances, partners can navigate pathways that somewhat counterbalance the asymmetries and foster a less patronizing relationship. For example, the Norwegian partners have attempted to ensure that they do not dominate the local partners by providing them with a participatory role. By recognizing power differentials and seeking ways to mitigate them, partners demonstrate promising signs of promoting equity, participation, autonomy, and solidarity, thereby transcending asymmetry. One of the partnerships exhibited a stronger degree of mutuality, which can be attributed to differences in the partnership arrangements that consider context-sensitive variables such as partnership modalities, pathways, activities, and individuals involved. This indicates that partners can make context-sensitive and practical adjustments in partnership arrangements to enhance the participatory role of the Southern partners.

This study demonstrates that the "at-home" partnership modality promotes the participation and ownership of the Southern partner, compared to the "sandwich" modality that involves scholarship abroad. While the academic qualifications Southern academics acquire through the "sandwich" scholarship are valuable in raising academic standards and social recognition, it would be overly simplistic to assume that the so-called "international standard" is always relevant and aligned with local needs (Mamdani, 2017). In this context, the "at-home" modality is commendable as it not only provides students with international experience while staying at home but also facilitates knowledge production within the South that responds to local needs.

The study reveals that partnerships can be formed through agreements between higher officials or through the initiative of faculties and academic units. Regardless of whether the partnership follows a top-down or bottom-up pathway, what matters most is how well the partnership arrangement and activity decisions are grounded in the academic unit and involve its academics, who are the key actors in the actual interaction. For instance, in one of the case studies, a partnership activity (MPhil) that was initiated and conceptualized from the top, with little input from the academic unit, ultimately proved unsuccessful. This highlights the need for a balanced approach that incorporates both top-down and bottom-up elements in partnership arrangements.

The individual involved in the partnership is another context-sensitive variable that has been found to have the potential to either address or reinforce the effects of structural obstacles. The presence of personal links and dedicated coordinators played a crucial role in establishing and advancing the partnerships. It is also important to note that differences in the diversity and types of partnership activities resulted in variations in the level of participation of the Southern partners, which should be taken into account when forming partnerships.

In conclusion, power relations persist in North-South HEPs, often placing Southern partners in a disadvantageous position. However, inequalities in resources and capacity can also serve as a basis for complementarity and collaboration, provided that partners recognize these imbalances and work together to mitigate their problematic consequences. Promisingly, this study identifies paths to achieving mutuality. Certain contextual and practical arrangements have enabled partnerships to function well within the inherent power relations and transcend them. Thus, this study points to the need for international partnership policy and practices to:

a. Emphasize recognizing the sources of asymmetry between partners and developing strategies to reduce their negative effects, to foster more mutual partnerships.
b. Prioritize context-sensitive partnership activities and models, such as the "at-home" approach, which can promote local partner engagement and responsiveness, when designing partnership structures.
c. Balancing top-down and bottom-up approaches, incorporating both high-level institutional agreements and grassroots, faculty-driven initiatives, to ensure partnerships are well-grounded.
d. Empower individuals in the partnership, as their role and interpersonal dynamics are crucial for navigating and surpassing partnership challenges.

Moreover, as this study focused primarily on the experiences and perspectives of the local partners in international HEPs, the findings may be limited in scope. This suggests the need for further studies that include the views of the Northern partners that may provide additional insights.

Notes:

[1] This study is extracted from the author's unpublished PhD dissertation, with a significant addition and update of data.
[2] Disclosure statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author

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Appendix A. Overview of the Two Partnership Programs

	UA-NU partnership	UB-NU partnership
Funding source	NORAD	
Main purpose	Capacity building of the local partner	
Duration	Six years (from late 2013-2020)	
Previous linkage	Institutional and personal linkages	Personal linkage
Main partnership activities	PhD training, joint-research, short-term training, community engagement, MA curriculum design	PhD and MPhil (Masters of Philosophy) training, short-term training, MPhil curriculum design
Modality	- 'At-home'—the partnership is, hosted in UA, with students' study visits in NU. - Involves both UA and NU academics - UA offers the degree	- 'Sandwich'—PhD and MPhil training is hosted in both institutions. - NU offers scholarships to PhD and MPhil students. - NU offers the PhD degree.
Pathways of development	More of bottom-up—formed at the department level with ratification at the university level.	More of top-down—formed at the college level and tried to engage departments.
Progresses until end of 2020	- Of 14 PhD students, 7 of them have completed their studies; - Three peer-reviewed books and 29 articles and book chapters were published; - Language resources (e.g., 2 dictionaries, 8 speech corpora, 5 web-archived corpora) were developed for some languages. - MA Curriculum for Sign Language was designed. - Training on linguistic was offered to many local community members. - Two new partnerships were created.	- Of 12 PhD students, 03 of them have completed their studies; - 15 MPhil students have completed elective courses at NU; - 17 articles were published by PhD students - Various short-term training and workshops that benefited UB's staff and students were offered. - New partnerships were created with one local and two foreign partners that brought additional joint-research opportunities and supports.

Appendix B. Summary of Partners' Roles and Responsibilities

UA-NU Partnership			UB-NU Partnership		
Joint assignments	UA's responsibilities	NU's responsibilities	Joint assignments	UA's responsibilities	NU's responsibilities
developing proposal, designing MA curriculum offer courses co-supervise PhD students conduct joint-research engage in community service activities	host the project manage the project facilitate networking with local community	assisting UA in managing, and coordinating and implementing the project empowering and supporting NU staff through experience sharing and capacity building training providing access to laboratory assisting UA in developing language technology	developing proposal, scheduling, budgeting, recruit PhD and MPhil students from UB develop MPhil curriculum host and offer courses to MPhil students	managing and monitoring the project reporting progresses in consultation with NU offer courses to MPhil students when they come back home	provide support to UB, share experience, offer short-term training to UB staff, mentor BU academics and students host, offer course, and supervise PhD students host, offer course to MPhil students provide educational material access to UB staff and students

Note: Summarized from interviews and review of documents

Taiwanese EFL Learners' Use of Learning Strategies in Developing Job Interview Skills

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Abstract: *This study investigates Taiwanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' use of strategies in developing job interview skills in English. The participants were 40 EFL learners majoring in English at a private university in Taiwan. The study was part of a four-week job interview training program, during which they prepared for a mock interview test. The students learned about the job interview process, expressions, and related language use, and practiced with their peers inside and outside the class. Throughout the training, they submitted weekly diary entries describing how they developed their job interview skills. Thematic analysis of these entries revealed various learning strategies and their applications. These included cognitive strategies, such as practicing and structuring output; metacognitive strategies, which involved arranging extra time to practice, planning the interview task by doing research on the Internet, and monitoring and evaluating their learning process; and social strategies, where students exchanged feedback collaboratively.*

Keywords: *job interview skills, learning strategies, collaborative learning, learner autonomy, EFL learners*

Background

In our increasingly globalized world, English as a foreign language (EFL) learners have unprecedented opportunities to engage in international careers. Taiwan launched the Bilingual 2030 policy to strengthen the English communication skills of its citizens, particularly among the younger generation, by 2030. According to Taiwan's National Development Council, "The government has launched the Bilingual 2030 policy precisely to boost the competitiveness of Taiwan's young generation to enable the next generation to enjoy better job and salary opportunities" (National Development Council, 2024, para. 2). This policy will be guided by a twofold vision, namely, "helping Taiwan's workforce connect with the world" and "attracting international enterprises to Taiwan; enabling Taiwan industries to connect to global markets and create high-quality jobs" (National Development Council, 2024, para.3). To thrive in an increasingly competitive global job market, higher education must place greater emphasis on creating "employability-development opportunities" (Harvey, 2001) to ensure that graduates are equipped with skills necessary to thrive in job interviews to secure employment (Krishnan et al., 2024).

Hou et al. (2021) claim that "Universities realise the need to provide sufficient educational activities and training to facilitate student employment" (p.296). As employability is now an important indicator for university rankings such as QS World University Rankings, and as a key measure for quality assurance (QA) for the Higher Education Evaluation & Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT), "the employability issue has successfully drawn the attention of institutions in Taiwan and has impacted institutional policy making and initiatives accordingly" (Hou et al., 2021, p.309).

As many companies and multinational corporations require English when recruiting employees (Chanh, 2023), the present study investigates the specific strategies employed by Taiwanese EFL

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learners as they develop their job interview skills in English at one of Taiwan's top-tier private universities. This study extends beyond a mere examination of strategy types to explore their practical application within both collaborative and autonomous learning settings. Studies on good language learners (GLLs) have shown that GLLs use diverse strategies to enhance language acquisition (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975). Language learning strategy, defined as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self- directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford 1990, p.8), plays a crucial role in developing various aspect of learners' language skills, including job interview skills, in their second/foreign language (L2). Kawai (2008), drawing on research conducted in China, Japan, and the U.S., claims that "Those who develop good oral skills appear to be frequent strategy users regardless of culture and learning context" (p. 219). Rubin (1975) argues that an exploration of the internal processes and cognitive strategies of GLLs may lead to the formulation of well-developed theories that can be effectively taught to others. Language learning strategies can be taught (Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Oxford, 2017), but it is crucial to first understand both the nature and application of strategies employed by language learners in developing effective approaches to teaching L2 job interview skills.

Research on Job Interview Training

In the evolving global job market, mastering English job interview skills has gained attention from researchers worldwide. A study examining employers' perspectives on the importance of English proficiency and communication skills among graduates entering the workforce in Malaysia revealed that, while English proficiency is crucial, "good communication skills can increase employability and opportunities for career advancement" (Ting et al., 2017, p.315). Suraprajit (2020) specifically analyzed communication strategies employed by Thai prospective employees during job interviews. The study identified common strategies such as code-switching and asking for repetition, which were frequently used to overcome communication challenges. Suraprajit's research emphasized the need for targeted training on communication strategies to address specific difficulties encountered in job interview settings.

Krishnan et al. (2024) investigated the performance of Malaysian fresh graduates in job interviews using the Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) framework to analyze their use of English. The study revealed that successful candidates were more likely to employ positive and evaluative language, leaving a strong impression on interviewers.

Various researchers have also explored pedagogical approaches to enhance students' job interview skills. A notable study by Louw et al. (2010) examined the impact of teaching pragmatics to ESL learners in Canada during job interview training. Their findings demonstrated that such interventions contributed to the development of learners' pragmatic competence, resulting in improved performance in mock job interviews.

Lackner and Martini (2017) investigated the impact of self-reflection on university students' interview performance. Using e-portfolios to reflect on significant learning experiences, students showed notable improvement in their ability to respond to behavioral interview questions. The findings suggest that self-reflective practices, especially when integrated into coursework with feedback, can enhance students' interview skills and their ability to articulate their competencies to potential employers.

Sumardi et al. (2020) explored the practice of peer feedback in a job interview class with a flipped classroom approach in a vocational school in Indonesia, revealing its positive impact on job interview preparation. Their study found that peer feedback promoted more interaction with peers and provided valuable insights for error correction, significantly improving students' job interview preparation.

While these studies shed light on communication strategies, language use, pedagogical effectiveness in teaching pragmatics, self-reflective learning tools, and peer feedback in preparing learners for successful job interviews, none have specifically explored the learning strategies that

EFL learners employ to develop job interview skills. This lack of focus on learning strategies leaves a critical gap in our understanding of how learners can be more effective in developing their job interview skills.

The Theoretical Perspectives of the Study

Macaro (2001) claims that the concept of learning strategies appears to be closely linked to that of learner autonomy. Learner autonomy signifies the process whereby learners take responsibility for their own learning (Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991). Little (1991) characterizes autonomous learners as individuals who "constantly reflect on what they are learning, why they are learning, how they are learning, and with what degree of success; and their learning is fully integrated with the rest of what they are" (p. 13). It is essential to note that the concept of learner autonomy does not necessarily mean learners have to learn alone (Little, 1990; Reid, 1993). Cooperative learning can also be considered to enable a form of learner autonomy, since the learners, to a large extent, control their own learning (Macaro, 1997). Based on this framework, it can be argued that the cultivation of job interview skills, much like that of other language skills, involves learners taking control over their learning, whether practicing alone or with peers.

Anderson (1980) distinguishes two types of knowledge, namely, declarative and procedural. Declarative knowledge refers to knowledge about facts while procedural knowledge refers to knowledge about how to perform tasks. According to Anderson (1993), practice plays a crucial role in converting declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. He argues that when learners repeatedly engage in tasks or activities related to a specific domain, they gradually internalize their knowledge, which enables them to deploy the acquired skills more automatically and efficiently. This process is applicable to developing L2 job interview skills, as consistent practice can help learners connect their understanding of suitable responses to interview questions with their practical ability to articulate those responses fluently in their target language.

The successful cultivation of L2 job interview skills also necessitates peer practice (Sumardi et al., 2020). Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes the inherently social nature of learning, asserting that engagement with others is crucial for an individual's cognitive development. Building on this sociocultural perspective, the process of practicing job interviews with peers emerges as a valuable learning experience. Collaboratively refining interview skills aligns with Vygotsky's notion of knowledge co-construction and finds support in Long and Porter's (1985) assertion that "a small group of peers provides a relatively intimate setting and, usually, a more supportive environment in which to try out embryonic SL [second language] skills" (p. 211). The supportive environment resulting from student–student interaction also enhances learners' motivation (Long & Porter, 1985) and reduces anxiety (Tsui, 1996).

Classification of Learning Strategies

Early research on learning strategies was conducted by researchers such as Rubin (1975, 1981) and Naiman et al. (1978), who studied GLLs. Rubin (1981), on the one hand, divided learning strategies into two primary categories: those that directly affect learning (e.g., clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guess/inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning, and practice) and those that contribute indirectly to learning (e.g., creating opportunities for practice and production tricks related to communication). Naiman et al. (1978), on the other hand, classified learning strategies into five primary categories: (1) the active task approach, (2) realization of language as a system, (3) realization of language as a means of communication and interaction, (4) the management of affective demands, and (5) monitoring L2 performance.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classified learning strategies into three categories, namely, (1) metacognitive strategies, (2) cognitive strategies, and (3) social affective strategies. Metacognitive strategies include "planning for learning, monitoring learning while it is taking place, or self-evaluation

of learning after the task has been completed" (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p.8). Cognitive strategies are intended to enhance learning by causing learners to interact with the material to be learned and manipulating it mentally, while social affective strategies refer to interaction with others, such as peers, to obtain feedback and reduce anxiety.

A more comprehensive classification was developed by Oxford (1990), who classified learning strategies as direct or indirect. Direct learning strategies are those that directly involve the language being learnt. This category includes *memory strategies* (such as creating mental linkages, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, and employing action), which help learners store and retrieve new information; *cognitive strategies* (such as practicing, receiving, and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structures for input and output), which "enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means"; and *compensation strategies* (such as overcoming limitations in speaking), which allow learners to "use the language despite their often large gaps in knowledge" (Oxford, 1990, p.37). Indirect strategies are those that do not directly involve the target language. Strategies that fall under this category include *metacognitive strategies*, which allow learners to control their own cognition by means of coordinating "the learning process by using functions such as centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating"; *affective strategies*, which help learners "regulate emotions, motivations, and attitudes"; and *social strategies*, which encourage learners to learn by interacting with others (Oxford, 1990, p.135).

Despite the existence of various classification schemes, none of the strategies are definitive; nor can the list of strategies be applied confidently to a number of learning situations (Macaro, 1997). Thus, more research is needed to explore the strategies used in contexts that have not been explored extensively, such as those used in developing L2 learners' job interview skills.

Research on the Learning Strategies of Taiwanese EFL Learners

Many studies on language learning strategies in Taiwan have used Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) or the Chinese version of SILL to investigate the frequencies with which different learning strategies are used (Chu et al., 2012; Ju, 2009; Lai, 2009; Yang, 2017; Yeh, 2015). These studies suggest that the more proficient the learners, the more effectively strategies are used. Lai's (2009) study, which examined the relationships between learning strategy use and patterns of strategy use based on language proficiency, revealed that proficient learners used cognitive and metacognitive strategies most frequently, while less proficient learners preferred social and memory strategies to cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Lai further found that the strategies used most frequently by proficient learners were "centering, arranging, and planning one's learning; using analyzing and reasoning skills; and practicing sounds and speaking" (2009, p. 275).

Chang et al. (2007) investigated the influence of gender and major on the use of learning strategies by Taiwanese university EFL learners and found that female learners indicated greater use of strategies than male learners in three of the six categories in SILL (cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and social strategies), while humanities and social science students reported using language learning strategies more frequently than students of other majors.

Huang (2012) conducted research to investigate the range of language learning strategies used by Taiwanese university EFL learners who had obtained a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score of above 620 using an open-ended questionnaire and interviews and found that the learners favored using metacognitive strategies. Huang's study also revealed that Taiwanese EFL learners used the following 18 strategies to improve their speaking skills:

> 1) talking to oneself, 2) repeating and imitating, 3) creating opportunities, 4) catching opportunities, 5) asking for clarifications and feedback, 6) encouraging oneself, 7) reading aloud, 8) self-monitoring and self-correcting, 9) preparing for intended topics, 10) taking notes, 11) extensive listening, 12) putting new expressions into practice, 13) doing related readings, 14) using circumlocutions or synonyms, 15) looking for correspondent expressions,

16) speaking slowly, 17) only talking with high-proficiency English speakers, and 18) taking control of the topics. (Huang, 2012, p.87)

Huang and Tsai (2024) explored the language learning strategies employed by student-athletes in higher education in Taiwan. Their findings indicate a pronounced preference for metacognitive strategies among student-athletes. They suggest that educators should design lessons that encourage planning, self-monitoring, and evaluation to better support this group of learners.

Berg et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-method study involving Taiwanese university EFL learners to develop the Taiwanese Inventory of Language Learning Strategies (TILLS). Their findings revealed differences between the strategies identified in TILLS and those in the SILL, suggesting that language learning strategies may vary across cultures.

As learning strategies in relation to the development of job interview skills have not been explored in Taiwan, this study addresses the gap in this literature by examining the specific learning strategies that Taiwanese EFL learners use to develop job interview skills, and how they use those strategies to enhance their job interview skills. Thus, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What learning strategies do EFL learners employ in developing their job interview skills in English?
2. How do EFL learners use their strategies in developing their job interview skills in English?

Research Methods

The participants in the present study consisted of 40 third-year university EFL learners (31 females and 9 males) majoring in English at one of the top-tier private universities in Taiwan. The participants in this study can be considered GLLs due to the competitive nature of admission to the English department of this university. The participants were enrolled in one of the department's required courses, namely, a course that focused on developing conversational skills. The course ran twice a week, with each lesson lasting 90 minutes. The 40 participants were from three separate sections of the same course taught by the same instructor, who is also the author of this study, with each section comprising between 13 and 15 students. In this course, the students were asked to prepare for a mock job interview test, and they were given four weeks to prepare for this test. Each participant was asked to sign up for the type of job they were interested in applying for and was interviewed accordingly. The jobs included translator, flight attendant, English teacher, publisher, secretary and receptionist, administrative assistant, public relations officer, trade specialist, and editor. Some of the participants were interested in pursuing further study at a graduate school straight after finishing their undergraduate study, so these participants were asked to prepare for a mock interview for graduate admission instead.

Campion and Campion (1987) pointed out that most research on job interview training indicates that the training process involves some combination of lectures, discussion, role-playing or practice, feedback, and reinforcement. All these elements were included in the job interview training of the present study, but in addition to these elements, the students in this study were assigned a partner from their class and had to practice their job interview skills with their partners outside the class for at least one hour every week. Every week they had to submit a one-page diary entry reflecting on and describing their process of developing their job interview skills.

Studies on learning strategies have been presented based on either retrospective analysis (O'Malley et al., 1985; Wenden & Rubin, 1987) or concurrent analysis of an ongoing task (O'Malley et al., 1989). Diaries have been considered "important introspective tools in language research" (Nunan, 1992, p.118). Oxford et al. (1996) define diaries as "a type of self-report which allows learners to record on a regular basis numerous aspects of their learning process, including but not limited to the use of specific language learning strategies" (p. 20). Through diary entries, "learners write personal observations about their own learning experiences and the ways in which they attempted

to solve language problems" (Chamot, 2005, p.114). According to Gass and Mackey (2007), "[d]iaries can yield insights into the learning process that may be inaccessible from the researcher's perspective alone" (p. 48). Rubin (2003) claims that "[d]iaries can be used very effectively to help students become aware of their learning process and to begin to reflect on new ways to address their learning problems" (p. 14).

Oxford (2014) highlights that learner journals or diaries, in contrast to more structured instruments like interviews or questionnaires, often provide unique data not typically captured through these methods. Despite their limitations, such as subjectivity and potential memory-related inaccuracies (Carson & Longhini, 2002; Oxford et al., 1996), diary studies are valued for their ability to offer authentic insights that are difficult to obtain otherwise (Bailey, 1983; Stakhnevich, 2005). In this study, to ensure data trustworthiness and systematic analysis, learners' diary entries were coded using Oxford's (1990) established taxonomy of learning strategies. This taxonomy was selected for its comprehensive nature and practical orientation towards supporting both teachers and learners, as highlighted by Norlund Shaswar and Wedin (2019).

Several dynamics played a role in shaping the data collection process. First, the fact that the author was also the instructor may have influenced the level of openness in the students' diary entries. While the participants were explicitly assured that their diary entries would have no impact on their grades, the existing relationship between the instructor and students might have led some students to be more guarded or selective in their reflections. However, this familiarity could also have encouraged trust, leading to more candid and detailed entries from some students.

The classroom environment also contributed to data collection. The course was designed to foster a supportive atmosphere, where students felt comfortable practicing and discussing their interview skills with their peers. This collaborative environment likely enhanced the quality of the data, as students were more willing to engage in reflective practices and share their learning experiences in their diaries.

The timing and format of diary submissions presented both challenges and benefits. Requiring weekly diary entries ensured that reflections were fresh and closely tied to the students' recent experiences, reducing the potential for memory-related inaccuracies. However, some students may have found it difficult to consistently reflect in-depth every week while they were busy practicing and trying to improve their overall job interview performance. Additionally, the open-ended nature of the diary entries, while valuable for capturing a wide range of insights, may have led to variability in the type and depth of information provided by different students. Nevertheless, since "developing learners' capacity for critical reflection is seen as one of the principal aims of an autonomy-fostering learning environment" (Cotterall, 1999, p.40), it was hoped that the diary assignments would still encourage them to reflect critically on their development of job interview skills.

Findings

Students' diary entries were anonymized and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis was guided by the research questions of the study: (1) What strategies were used when students developed their job interview skills? and (2) How did they use those strategies? As an initial step, the diaries were coded to identify the range of strategies employed during the students' job interview preparation. These strategies were then categorized by matching them with those in Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of learning strategies. Table 1 shows the strategies identified in the diaries and the number of students who described using those strategies.

Table 1. Types of Strategies Identified and the Number of Students Who Used Them

	Direct Strategies	Indirect Strategies	
Strategy Types	Cognitive Strategies	Metacognitive Strategies	Social Strategies
Number of Students	40	35	14

The most prominent strategies identified in students' diaries are cognitive strategies, which were found in all 40 students' (100%) diaries. These included their actual practices as well as their creation of structured output. Metacognitive strategies, utilized by 35 students (87.5%), were also widely adopted. These strategies included arranging extra time to practice, planning the interview task by doing research on the Internet, and monitoring and evaluating their own learning process. Additionally, 14 students (35%) used social strategies by collaboratively exchanging feedback with their peers and supporting each other while practicing. The ways in which these strategies were used will be discussed in the subsequent section.

Cognitive Strategies

Practicing

All students in this study wrote about their practice during the process of preparing for the mock job interview exam. One notable way of practicing shown in their diaries was repetition as shown in Extract 1.

> Extract 1
> *During the previous practice, I think I still didn't do very well with the self-introduction part. Therefore, I have practiced the self-introduction part several times at home.* (Student#04/F/ Week 4 Diary)

As shown in Extract 1, a student tried to improve her fluency by repeatedly practicing the same interview question, which she felt she was not answering well.

Talking to oneself, which is a strategy also found in Huang's (2012) study, emerges as a noteworthy practicing strategy among certain students, as exemplified in Extracts 2 and 3.

> Extract 2
> *Since the first interview practice, I've continuously thought about the interview questions from the list and come up with some workable answers. Moreover, I've been trying to speak out my answer when I walk and run alone. Therefore, I feel that I answered more smoothly than I did last time.* (Student#16/F/Week 2 Diary)

> Extract 3
> *It's better for me to practice all the time, even on my way to the classes. Although people might think that I'm stupid talking to myself, it doesn't bother me, because I enjoy practicing it.* (Student#28/F/Week 4 Diary)

In Extract 2, the learner engages in the continuous contemplation of interview questions, actively formulating and refining responses while walking or running alone. The distinctive feature of this practice lies in vocalizing these answers, and the participant asserts that this unconventional approach contributed to a perceived enhancement in the smoothness of their responses to those interview questions. Similarly, Extract 3 highlights the importance of consistent practice through self-talk, as the participant commits to refining their interview skills by engaging in self-dialogue even during routine activities, such as commuting. Both examples illustrate that verbalizing responses to interview questions during solo practice is a valuable strategy for reinforcing and internalizing learned responses, potentially leading to enhanced performance.

Students' description of their job interview practices in their diary entries also provided valuable insights into the benefits of practicing. Consider Extracts 4 and 5 where students discuss the benefits of practicing.

Extract 4
I have practiced for the job interview for almost two weeks. Like the proverb says, "practice makes perfect." I think the proverb is absolutely right in the job interview. The more you practice, the more confidence you have in the interview. (Student#05/M/Week 2 Diary)

Extract 5
Through our continued practicing with each other, we gradually became more familiar with the commonly asked questions and how we could respond to them. (Student#25/F/Week 3 Diary)

These accounts show that there are many advantages associated with practicing constantly. For example, Extract 4 reveals that a student gained more confidence as he practiced more, and Extract 5 indicates that one student, after continuing to practice, became familiar with the types of questions commonly asked in job interviews and how to respond to them.

Creating Structure of Output

To optimize their performance in job interview practice, some students took notes and brainstormed responses to certain interview questions. The following examples provide concrete instances of how notetaking contributes to the optimization of performance in job interview simulations.

Extract 6
In order to practice and introduce myself more smoothly, after I had finished my practice with my partner, I instantly wrote down five adjectives. They are optimistic, responsible, concentrated, thoughtful, and challenging. In my personal opinion, I think these qualities are extremely important for being a translator. (Student#04/F/Week 3 Diary)

Extract 7
It is hard to think of good answers to show our personalities and characteristics that are suitable for the job. Therefore, in our practice, we brainstormed for some time and decided to prepare the answers for our next practice. (Student#02/F/Week 1 Diary)

Extracts 6 and 7 illustrate the difficulties students encountered in articulating their personalities and the characteristics deemed suitable for employment, prompting a deliberate effort to brainstorm and formulate answers in advance, aiding them in refining their job interview skills.

Metacognitive Strategies

Arranging and Planning Learning

Analysis of students' diary entries revealed a proactive approach to arranging extra time to practice and plan their learning. Consider Extracts 8 and 9, which show students optimizing practice opportunities by increasing the frequency and duration of their practice sessions beyond the stipulated requirements.

Extract 8
We decided that we would practice at least twice every week, and Thursday was the first time we practiced. (Student#07/F/Week 1 Diary)

Extract 9
For the second practice, this time we tried to make our meeting longer to ensure that we could have enough time to discuss more interview questions. (Student#08/F/Week 2 Diary)

Extract 8 highlights the commitment of the students, as they made the decision to conduct practice sessions at least twice a week, surpassing the required frequency of once a week. In Extract 9, the student further demonstrated her dedication by extending the duration of the second practice session. The decision to lengthen the meeting was aimed at allowing sufficient time for an in-depth discussion covering a wider range of interview questions. These examples demonstrate that this strategic approach allowed students to capitalize on the time available and actively enhance their proficiency in job interview skills.

Some students actively sought resources online as part of their preparation to enhance their job interview performance. In Extracts 10, 11, and 12, the significance of online resources in the context of job interview preparation becomes evident.

> Extract 10
> *Before the second interview practice, I made some preparations for the interview. I searched for some possible interview questions on the internet to have a basic idea of what the questions would be like*. (Student#30/F/Week 2 Diary)

> Extract 11
> *We were not really familiar with what types of additional skills our jobs require. We tried to fill some in by surfing on the internet. What we might find could be the answers to our short-term goals in the job we were applying for. [...] I think enough preparation in gathering information about the job and required skills can help in improving our confidence.* (Student#01/F/Week 3 Diary)

> Extract 12
> *Since I understood the importance of familiarity with the company applied to, I did some research about the organization in terms of their geographical features, their educational missions, and their requirements of candidates.* (Student#03/M/Week 3 Diary)

Extract 10 illustrates a proactive approach as the participant undertook preliminary research, seeking potential interview questions online to gain a foundational understanding. Extract 11 demonstrates how the internet fills knowledge gaps on job requirements and skills and how gathering information can help students boost their confidence. Extract 12 further demonstrates the strategic utilization of online resources to become familiar with the company to which the student was applying.

Monitoring and Evaluating Learning

Most of the students who used metacognitive strategies commented on their progress in improving their job interview skills. Some even evaluated their job interview performance during practice by comparing it with previous practice sessions. Oxford (1990) maintains that strategies to evaluate learning include self-monitoring and self-evaluating

The self-monitoring strategy, as described by Oxford (1990), involves identifying errors in understanding or producing the new language, determining their significance, tracking their source, and striving to eliminate them (p. 140). In this study, the self-monitoring strategy specifically entails learners recognizing areas in their job interview performance that require improvement. Extract 13 demonstrates a student realizing the need to elaborate on responses after monitoring her output.

> Extract 13
> *My responses still tend to be short. I am not able to expand the conversion … Thus, I have to do more research in advance so that I might have more to say.* (Student#32/F/Week 2 Diary)

In Extract 13, the student notices her tendency to provide brief answers and acknowledges the need to enhance the depth of her responses by conducting more thorough research in advance. Another student, as mentioned in Extract 14, reflects on her lack of lexical repertoire to express herself formally in an interview context.

Extract 14
There were some difficulties that I had, including that I lacked the necessary words. I think I have to know how to use the proper words when I practice. (Student#28/F/Week 2 Diary)

Extract 15 features another student who observed excessive use of fillers such as "ums" and "ahs" during practice a week before the mock job interview and decided to improve in this regard.

Extract 15
Although we were able to answer most of the questions, there were still lots of "ums" and "ahs." Another thing we need to work on is to shorten our thinking time. I believe if we say our answers out loud, our thoughts will become clearer, and our answers can be more organized. So, I guess these will be the major aspects we need to improve before the actual mock job interview next week. (Student#16/F/Week 3 Diary)

Extract 15 exemplifies how self-monitoring not only involves identifying linguistic shortcomings, but also extends to addressing non-lexical elements, such as speech fillers (e.g., *ums* and *ahs*), to improve overall communication effectiveness. Such fillers are common disfluencies that indicate hesitation on the part of the speaker (Corley & Stewart, 2008, pp.589-590). These examples collectively illustrate how the self-monitoring strategy can enhance metacognitive awareness among language learners, enabling them to identify and address their weaknesses for improved performance.

Self-evaluating as a strategy, according to Oxford (1990), involves evaluating one's progress in the target language in comparison to earlier stages. Extracts 16, 17, and 18 indicate the same learner evaluating her performance against previous practice sessions during Week 2 to Week 4.

Extract 16
I thought the second practice was better than the last time, but I know it was different when I was in a real job interview. Therefore, I have to prepare well, and I hope I can do better than this time. (Student#30/F/Week 2 Diary)

In Extract 16, the student reflects on the improvement in Week 2, which was the second practice session, and comments about the need for better preparation to do even better than this round of practice.

Extract 17
The third time practicing the job interview is easier for me now. It was the third time practicing the job interview, and it is easier for me now. I can answer almost all the questions fluently compared to the previous practice time. (Student#30/F/Week 3 Diary)

Extract 17 highlights the student's growing confidence and fluency in job interview scenarios in Week 3. The student's comparison with the previous practice session emphasized the positive progression, providing a clear indicator of improvement in her job interview skill development.

Extract 18
I think the practice becomes better and better. At least we can answer all the questions. I also have some basic knowledge from the many times we've practiced. (Student#30/F/Week 4 Diary)

By Week 4, the student perceives even more progress, as shown in Extract 18, highlighting increased fluency in answering questions compared to earlier practice sessions. As the above examples demonstrate, students' self-evaluation of their job interview skills each time they practiced reassured them as they found themselves improving each time.

Social Strategy

Peer Feedback

In their reflective diaries, students consistently reported engaging in collaborative efforts with their peers, exchanging valuable feedback and suggestions during practice sessions. The collaborative nature of these interactions is emphasized in the following examples, highlighting the significance of peer engagement in the exchange of feedback and suggestions.

> Extract 19
> *Every time, after we finish the seven minutes, we would give each other feedback and try to solve the weaknesses … Every practice, it was great that we would receive each other's feedback.* (Student#10/F/Week 1 Diary)

> Extract 20
> *The way we practiced was that we asked each other questions in turn and then gave each other some suggestions and comments.* (Student#08/F/Week 2 Diary)

As evident in Extracts 19 and 20, students employed a systematic approach to offer constructive feedback, taking turns and timing their responses during interview practice. This structured process allowed them to strike a balance between addressing interview questions and helping each other improve. Extracts 21, 22, and 23 further reveal the benefits derived from peer feedback.

> Extract 21
> *During the practice with my partner, we not only discussed what and how to respond to some of the questions, but also corrected some of each other's pronunciations that were wrong, which is also essential to a job interview.* (Student#25/F/Week 4 Diary)

> Extract 22
> *My partner told me to pay attention to the tense I used while speaking. As I talked, I switched tenses again and again. Maybe I have to calm down and think before I start to talk.* (Student#10/F/Week 1 Diary)

> Extract 23
> *My partner did offer me lots of useful suggestions … For example, she asked me some questions about my journalism courses and my experiences in journalism. I was stuck at that moment because I couldn't translate some specific names of journalism courses immediately. Therefore, she suggested that I should search for the English names of those courses, which might be useful for me to reply to my interviewers. She also gave me a piece of advice about talking about the details of courses in the Journalism and English Departments.* (Student#07/F/Week 2 Diary)

In Extract 21, students took the initiative to correct each other's pronunciation, recognizing the importance of clear articulation in a job interview context. Extract 22 further illustrates the benefits of peer feedback, as the student received valuable advice from their peer on maintaining consistency in verb tenses during verbal communication. Moreover, Extract 23 provides a concrete example of a student receiving strategic advice from their partner about handling specific questions related to the field of the job they were applying for.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate the diverse range of cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies used by EFL students in Taiwan to develop their job interview skills. The prominence of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in this study aligns with Lai's (2009) observation that proficient learners frequently use these strategies.

The benefit of cognitive strategies, such as practicing and creating structured output, found in the data corroborates Oxford's (1990) assertion that these strategies enable learners to produce new language effectively. The students' emphasis on repetition and self-talk as practicing strategies mirrors Huang's (2012) findings, which identified talking to oneself and repeating and imitating as common strategies among Taiwanese EFL learners. Extensive speaking practice outside the classroom, as highlighted by Sun (2012), is known to enhance students' confidence and perceived gains in their speaking skills. This is evident in the diary entries, which clearly demonstrate how the students' persistent engagement in practice activities became a powerful strategy for proceduralizing their declarative knowledge, contributing to their perceived improvement in the fluency of their responses to interview questions while also boosting their confidence.

Cohen (2007) emphasizes that metacognitive strategies are crucial because they involve a process where "the learner consciously and intentionally attends selectively to a learning task, analyzes the situation and task, plans for a course of action, monitors the execution of the plan, and evaluates the effectiveness of the whole process" (p. 32). Findings from this study reveal that students employed these strategies by monitoring and evaluating their progress to identify areas needing improvement, which led them to extend their practice time and brainstorm responses through online research. This extended practice time is consistent with Sun's (2012) findings on the benefits of extensive speaking practice outside the classroom, reinforcing the idea that deliberate, self-directed practice is essential for bridging the gap between declarative and procedural knowledge. Furthermore, the application of metacognitive strategies by the students in this study has been shown to significantly boost their confidence and perceived improvement in their ability to respond to interview questions. This aligns with Forbes and Fisher's (2018) research, which demonstrates that the use of metacognitive learning strategies in developing foreign language speaking skills leads to improved student confidence and proficiency in the target language.

Social strategies, particularly peer feedback, further emphasize the value of collaborative learning environments in language acquisition. Drawing on Pica et al.'s (1996) argument that "language learners are frequently and increasingly each other's resource for language learning" (p. 60), the practice of offering and receiving feedback during these sessions allowed students to identify their weaknesses, such as mispronunciations, incorrect use of tenses, and other flaws in their job interview performance that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. This collaborative learning process mirrors the positive outcomes of integrating peer feedback in job interview classes observed in Sumardi & Aniq's (2020) study, reinforcing the importance of incorporating peer feedback into EFL curricula to improve students' interview skills. The collaborative nature of the process, characterized by mutual support and constructive feedback exchange among peers, also echoes Storch's (2002) assertion that language learning thrives in collaborative settings.

In this study, affective strategies, which Oxford (1990) describes as methods for controlling emotions, attitudes, and motivation through relaxation, self-encouragement, and self-reward, were not observed in the data. This absence might be due to the students being instructed to document the process of developing their job interview skills, possibly leading them to believe that how they managed their emotions, attitudes, and motivation was not relevant to include in their diaries. Additionally, they might have felt uncomfortable or shy about sharing their affective management strategies in a diary that would be read by their instructor.

Overall, the findings from this study contribute to the broader literature on language learning strategies by providing empirical evidence of the specific strategies used by Taiwanese EFL learners in job interview preparation. These strategies identified in this research can be integrated into future job interview training to boost students' confidence and improve their ability to respond smoothly to interview questions, ultimately enhancing their overall job interview performance.

Limitation

There are some limitations to this study that need to be taken into consideration in future research. First, the sample size of 40 students may not represent all EFL students in Taiwan who can be considered as GLLs. Future studies with a larger sample size could provide more insight into the kind of strategies GLLs use and how they employ those strategies in developing job interview skills. In addition, since the data was a self-report account of their process of preparing for mock job interviews, collected through diary entries, participants may not have reported every single strategy they employed. Future studies could include multiple data collection methods to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the strategies used. This could involve combining self-reports with interviews and surveys to ensure a complete and more accurate picture of the participants' use of strategies.

Conclusion

This study investigated the strategies used by EFL learners, focusing on Taiwanese students, to develop job interview skills. The findings revealed that cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies are crucial in bridging the gap between learners' declarative knowledge of what to say to respond to job interview questions and their procedural knowledge of how to articulate those responses fluently in the target language. By emphasizing these strategies, this research contributes to the evolving research on job interview training in higher education.

The findings also contribute to the growing body of literature on language learning strategies, particularly in the context of EFL learners preparing for global workforce integration, as well as the objectives of Taiwan's Bilingual 2030 policy by offering practical learning strategies to increase the competitiveness of Taiwan's young generation in the global job market. As EFL programs strive to enhance students' English communication skills for the international job market, the insights from this research provide practical applications for educational policies and curricula. Curriculum developers should incorporate these strategies into EFL job interview training programs to improve learners' preparation to compete in the global job market and equip them with practical tools for navigating job interviews.

While the study's context is grounded in Taiwanese higher education, the insights gained extend far beyond this setting. The actionable strategies identified can be adapted and applied in various EFL contexts worldwide, offering educational institutions valuable tools to enhance the employability of their graduates. Integrating targeted job interview training into EFL programs is not only beneficial but necessary as employability becomes an increasingly important metric for university rankings and quality assurance globally. By integrating research outputs on job interview training, as suggested by Krishnan et al. (2024), institutions across diverse EFL contexts can better prepare undergraduates for successful employment. This approach fosters linguistic competence, builds confidence, and ensures students are ready to excel in real-world job interviews.

Ultimately, enhancing job interview training within EFL programs supports the broader vision of preparing a globally competitive workforce. This research thus contributes to elevating educational standards and improving the global employability of graduates in various EFL contexts.

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China as a Destination for International Students: A "Pull and Repel" Factors Analysis in the Post-COVID-19 Era

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Abstract: International student mobility is a complex phenomenon influenced by numerous factors. This study examines the prospect of China as a destination country for international students in the post-COVID-19 era. With qualitative data from 30 frontline international educators (support staff in international student recruitment and services) from 30 Chinese universities, this study has determined a set of "pull" factors that serve to attract international students to study in China and a set of "repel" factors that discourage students from going. On the basis of both the "pull" and "repel" factors identified, the participants anticipate important challenges for China's international enrollment in the short term, but stay optimistic about the long-term prospect. The "pull and repel" factors analysis is found to be a useful approach to examining the attractiveness of a host country to international students in a focused manner.

Keywords: China, international students, mobility, challenges, opportunities

Introduction

China has aimed to be a key destination country for international students in the new century. Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, China achieved much success in international student enrollment, becoming the top destination country in Asia and the third in the world in 2018 (Liu & Liu, 2021). But what does the future hold for China as an emerging destination country for international students? The strict COVID-19 measures in China have seriously reduced the momentum of international student enrollment. China's post-COVID-19 economy is not rebounding as strongly and quickly as expected, and the new geopolitical situation of the world today, particularly the trade war, the tech war, and the decoupling discourse between the US and China, has created much uncertainty for student mobility. Will China be able to continue its success in attracting more international students to its door? What challenges does China face and what opportunities does China have? These are the questions we hope to answer in this study with 30 Chinese international educators from 30 Chinese institutions. The ultimate goal of this study is to gain a glimpse into the future outlook of China as a destination country in the new global context.

To answer the above questions, this study has adopted an innovative framework, namely, the "pull and repel" factors analysis. The "pull" factors are conditions of a country that attract international students to go there. The "repel" factors are conditions of the same country that prevent students from going. The traditional "push and pull" factors analysis (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), a demand-side analysis of international student mobility, is used to compare the conditions of a home country and a host country of international students. The goal is to understand students' decision-making process. The new "pull and repel" factors analysis, a supply-side analysis of international student mobility, focuses on the conditions of one particular host country only. The goal is to examine the attractiveness of the host country to international students. Previous studies on China

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as a destination country for international students tend to focus either on the advantages (e.g. Ma, 2016; Lee, 2019) or the disadvantages (e.g., Ding, 2016; Ma & Wen, 2018), while this study aims to determine the advantages alongside disadvantages in the new post-COVID-19 global context. In addition to gleaning the future outlook of China as a host country for international students based on the "pull and repel" factors identified, this study also aims to evaluate this new approach to understanding the global mobility of students.

Chinese History of International Education

For the longest time, as the center of the Confucian cultural circle, China took so much pride in being the "Central Kingdom" that it closed its northern border with a "Great Wall" and restricted trade on its southern coast, for fear of potential ill influence from "barbarian states" (Liu, 2010). However, after China's defeats in the two Opium Wars (1840-1842 and 1856-1860), the Qing government (1644–1912) was forced to stop its "closed door" policy and started to engage in a self-strengthening effort through Western learning from the 1860s (Liu 2010, p.21). Foreign language education was started for the first time in China to allow Chinese citizens to access Western technology. Chinese students and scholars were also sponsored by the Qing government to study science and technology in the US and Europe. After losing the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, there was a further realization among the Chinese elites that China should also reference Western governance models in order to fundamentally change its backwardness and weakness (Liu, 2010). After the 1911 Revolution that ended China's 2000 years of imperial rule, an important nation-building task during the Republican period (1911-1949) was believed to be an even deeper cultural change in China, as the traditional Confucian culture came under scrutiny (Yuan, 2010). The Western traditions of democracy and science were important cultural imports of this period.

In the first three decades of the P.R. China (1949 to 1976), Chairman Mao attempted to transition China into a classical Socialist country with a planned economy, envisioned by Karl Marx. The attempt failed to bring prosperity to China. From the 1980s, China once again turned to the West and borrowed into China the Capitalist market-driven model of economic development (Tian & Liu, 2010). After fast economic growth for two decades in the 1980s and 1990s, thanks to the new economic model, the number of Chinese students studying abroad grew quickly since 2000, increasing about 25% each year, and over 90% of the growth was driven by self-sponsored students (Liu, 2021). China has become a top source country of international students in all major host countries in the West in the first two decades of the 21st century. The huge tide of Chinese students flowing overseas for higher education, particularly self-financed undergraduate students, has been much appreciated by universities in the West, many of whom rely on international tuition as a major revenue source (Liu, 2021).

The above historical review indicates that for over a century from the 1860s, the Chinese international education effort was strongly characterized by an outbound mobility of Chinese students and scholars to access Western technology, culture, governance ideas, and economic models (Liu & Huang, 2023). The Chinese students' outbound mobility also fits into the larger picture of the global inequality in higher education with international students mostly flowing from the developing Global South to the developed Global North (Altbach, 2002).

International Student Education in China

The economic rise and increasing international influence of China under the leadership of a Communist government have caused some unease, suspicion and concern among Western liberal democratic countries. China is perceived by some countries in the West as a danger and a threat to the existing world order led by the USA (Broomfield, 2003). It is believed by the Chinese government that the world's adverse impression of China is a result of a lack of knowledge about the country and a lack of experience in the country, and thus the best way to increase the world's understanding

of China is to attract more international students to study in Chinese universities(Liu & Lin, 2016). Chinese universities are supposed to help international students develop a good understanding of the country, with the hope that they are able to serve as China's "para-diplomats" (Mulvey & Lo, 2021). International higher education in major Anglo countries has been pursued both as an export industry to obtain economic profit and as an immigrant recruitment platform to obtain top talents (Findlay 2011, pp. 164-165; Liu, 2023, pp.950-951). However, the Chinese objective in international student education is to serve China's international diplomacy by educating a large number of international talents who are China-savvy and China-friendly (Liu & Lin, 2016).

In order to achieve its diplomatic goal, China rolled out a "Study in China Plan" in 2010, aiming to attract half a million international students to Chinese universities in ten years. The goal was almost achieved two years ahead of schedule before the COVID-19 Pandemic. In 2018, there were 492,200 international students recorded in China (Liu & Liu, 2021). This is a major event in the world's international education industry, given the fact that China was a non-traditional destination for international students in the Global South. The bottom line in Figure 1 shows the steady growth of international students studying in China since 2004. To gain a positive international environment and to improve the brand of Chinese higher education, China is not making money out of international education, but spending money on scholarships to attract more international students to China (Liu, 2021). About 12% of international students in China are supported by national government scholarships in 2018 (Liu & Liu, 2021). In addition to national government funding, local governments and institutions also provide their own scholarship opportunities. A higher enrollment of international students is seen by China as an indicator of "World-Class" universities which China hopes to have more of (Jokila, 2015). Given this understanding, Chinese institutions are also motivated to recruit and retain more international students.
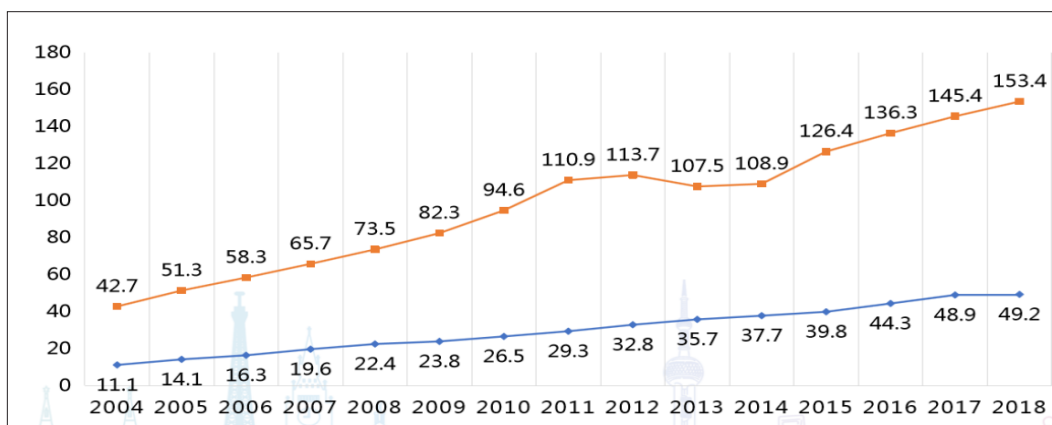
Figure 1. The numbers (in 10,000) of Chinese Students Studying Overseas (orange line) and Overseas Students Studying in China (blue line) (source: Miao & Qu, 2022)

Despite the fast growth, China as a destination for international students is still a recent development, and China is still only an emerging market for international students. As Figure 1 shows, there is still a huge "trade deficit" between the number of Chinese students studying overseas (top line) and the number of overseas students studying in China (bottom line). In 2018, over 1.5 million Chinese students were studying overseas, but the number of international students studying in China was less than 0.5 million. As Figure 2 shows, the proportion of international students in China was only 1.20% of total enrollment, much lower than the proportion of international students in more mature host countries of international students, such as Australia (28%), Canada (21.40%) and the UK (20.90%). The US is the largest destination for international students, but the percentage (5.50%) is low due to the large domestic student base. In a national meeting on education in 2018,

Chinese President Xi Jinping called on the international education community in China to make Chinese higher education more competitive globally and to turn China into a major destination of education abroad desired by outstanding youths around the world (Cheng & Zhang, 2020). This is an ambitious goal for China as an emerging destination country, a non-English speaking country in the Global South. It is no small task if China hopes to catch up with more established host countries in the proportion of international enrollment. Is the Chinese international education community confident about achieving the national goal of turning China into a top destination for international students, particularly in the new post-COVID-19 global context with complex geopolitical tension and a sluggish global economy? This is a question we hope to answer in this study.
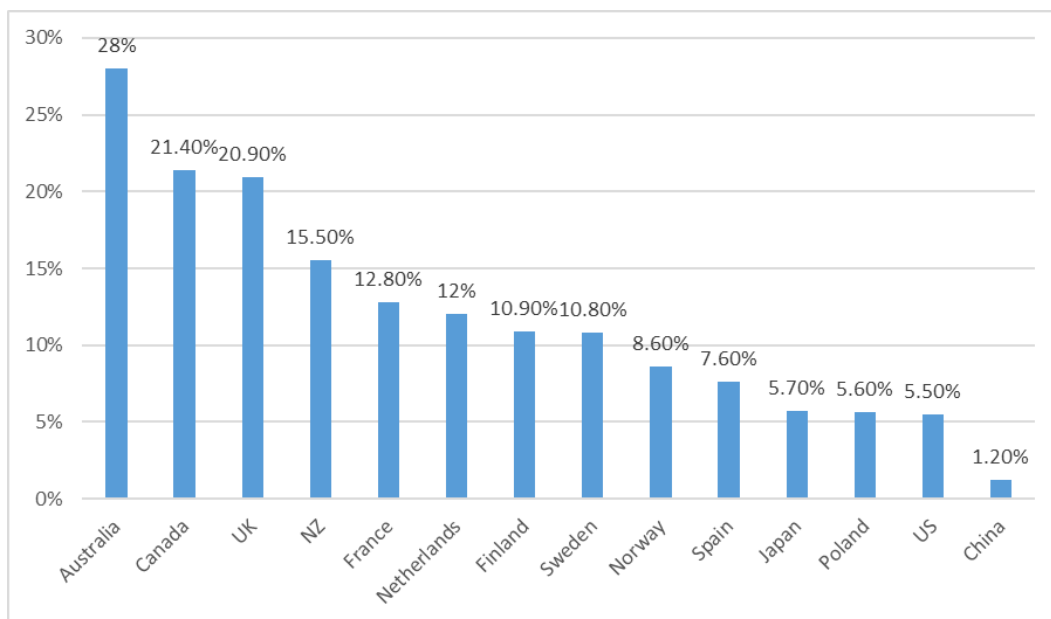
Figure 2. Proportion of International Students in Major Host Countries in 2019 (source: Miao & Qu, 2022)

The "Pull and Repel" Factors Analysis

The most foundational theory in understanding students' and scholars' international mobility has been Bourdieu's theory of social capital reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977; 1986). International mobility happens when privileged families and individuals aim to convert their advantages in social capitals across national borders. Based on this fundamental understanding, international education scholars have been analyzing the "push" and "pull" factors to predict the patterns of international student mobility (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The "push" factors are conditions existing in students' home country that motivate them to pursue higher education abroad. There can be negative factors, such as poor quality of higher education at home, but also positive factors, such as strong economic growth and increasing household income. The "pull" factors refer to conditions existing in a host country of international students that serve to attract international students to study there, such as perceived better quality of education, rich intercultural learning environment, and post-graduation immigration opportunities. The push-pull factors analysis basically compares conditions in two countries, the home country and the host country, and analyzes what makes students want to move from their home country and go to the host country to study. The push-pull factors analysis has been used to analyze Chinese students' outbound mobility (e.g. Yu, et al, 2023).

The push and pull factors analysis actually focuses on individual students' decision-making process, considering and contrasting conditions at home and host countries. It is an analysis of the

demand side of international student mobility. International student mobility is seen as a result of individual students and their families seeking better education opportunities (often delivered in the medium of a desirable language that is not available in their home countries) and better work/living conditions beyond national borders. The motivations of mobile students and their parents (the demand) are important, but it is also important to analyze the supply side of the international education enterprise, that is, why countries and universities in major host countries are interested in recruiting and educating international students from other countries. From the perspective of the supply side, student migration, as a form of knowledge migration, is no longer a neutral process (Findlay, 2011). As was mentioned above, major Anglo countries, such as the US, the UK, Australia and Canada, pursue international student education as an export industry and a talent recruitment platform, and China, as a non-Western and non-English-speaking host country of international students, pursues an international diplomatic goal instead to educate China savvy and China-friendly students (Liu & Lin, 2016). The design of this study is a unique one. It focuses on China as a host country for international students, so it is a supply-side study. But the goal is not to study why China recruits international students, which is a well-established area of study (e.g. Liu & Lin, 2016; Mulvey & Lo, 2021; Xu, 2023). Instead, the goal of this study is to examine China's conditions as a destination country for international students, both favorable conditions that "pull" international students to go and unfavorable conditions that "repel" students from going. So it is not a "push and pull" analysis, but a "pull and repel" analysis that focuses on the attractiveness of China as a host country for international students in the new global context. Table 1 summarizes the differences between a traditional "pull and push" analysis and the "pull and repel" analysis conducted in this study:

Table 1. "Pull and Push" Analysis vs. "Pull and Repel" Analysis

	"Pull and Push" Analysis	**"Pull and Repel" Analysis**
Typology	Demand-side analysis	Supply-side analysis
Focus	Advantages of a host country and disadvantages of a source country	Both advantages and disadvantages of a host country
Perspective	International student mobility as a politically neutral event with individual students and parents pursuing better educational opportunities	International student mobility as a purposeful national competitive strategy with countries pursuing national interests based on needs
Goal	To determine the potential volume of student mobility from one particular country to another	To determine the attractiveness of a particular host country for students from different source countries

Source: Constructed by author

A review of current literature has shown a limited number of studies in this area. On the "pull" side, China's rapid economic development and future prospects are found to be a key factor that attracts international students to China (Ma, 2016). Studying in China is thus a good investment in linguistic and cultural capital conducive to a better career prospect (Lee, 2019). The quickly improving quality of higher education in China is another factor that attracts international students to China (Wen & Hu, 2018). On the "repel" side, the quality of education and other services in China is still lower than international benchmarks (Ding, 2016), and the in-class learning experiences of international students in China still have much room for improvement (Ma & Wen, 2018). The frontline international educators in China are the key stakeholders of China's international student education. How do they perceive China's advantages and disadvantages as an emerging destination for international education? After some quick quantitative growth, China's international student education is experiencing some growing pains and system transitions (Liu & Liu, 2021). The new

geopolitical situation of the world today, particularly the "decoupling" tensions with China, also poses challenges to China's international student education. How do Chinese international educators view the future prospects of China's international education as industry insiders? Is China able to attract more international students to Chinese universities in the new global context? This is what this study hopes to find out.

Methodology

The participants of this qualitative study are 30 frontline international educators from 30 different Chinese universities. Most of them work as international student recruiters and international student advisors. They were invited to participate in this study while they were studying in a leadership development program in Canada from an international comparative approach. They were all given the following open-ended written interview questions:

> "China is aiming to be a top destination country for international students in the new century. After the last decade's fast growth, how would you assess China's challenges and opportunities in international student education in the next decade? Please help make a list of challenges and a list of opportunities that you perceive as frontline international educators in Chinese universities. In addition, please share with us whether you feel confident about the future of China as a destination country of international students and why."

This study hopes to collect qualitative data from an emic perspective (Creswell, 2006) that are Chinese international educators' own perceptions of China's challenges, opportunities, and future prospects in international student education. The participants were allowed time to think and the freedom to write in either Chinese or English. Most of them opted to respond in Chinese for a fuller expression of meaning. The 30 participants' responses were anonymously coded N1-30. Based on the interview questions, the data were organized into three general areas first: challenges, opportunities and future prospects. In each area, the 30 responses from 30 participants were subjected to a thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with three layers of coding. During the first layer of coding, salient statements in relation to the interview question were highlighted. The second layer of coding allocated highlighted statements into thematic categories. During the third layer of coding, the thematic categories derived from the second layer of coding were clustered into fewer and more general categories for presentation. The number of mentions of each theme by the 30 participants is recorded and reported to show the weight of the theme (n/30=n out of 30). Apart from a thick description of the data collection and data analysis process, member checking through prolonged engagement with the participants (3 months) is a major strategy to secure the trustworthiness of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To demonstrate trustworthiness in the presentation, some direct quotes are translated by the author (the author is fully bilingual with the first language being Chinese) and used to support key thematic areas.

Findings

When presenting the findings of this study, we will balance both the frequency and saliency of themes. A more frequently appearing theme is considered significant. A theme that does not appear as often, but is considered salient in relation to the research question, is also presented. The frequency of appearance for each theme is provided.

The "Repelling" Challenges

China as a destination country suffers from bad press globally due to the geopolitical tension between China and the US-led Western world (17/30). China is often portrayed as a sinister country in the

Western media, and thus it may scare off many international students. This is considered a major challenge for China's international student education, receiving 17 mentions:

> *The geopolitical factor is a big factor. China's rise and global influence have not been accepted well. The global image of China, painted in the Western media, has a very negative impact on China's ability to attract international students, particularly from the West. There is fear toward China. (n4)*

Many of the Chinese international educators in this study admit that Chinese higher education's quality and international recognition are still low in comparison to more established systems in the West (11/30). The quality of student services in China, both on campus and off campus, is also low, which results in poorer student experiences (13/30):

> *The English competence of staff in non-international offices is poor, and there are no English services for banking, housing, retail, etc. in English off campus. The international student service center is often understaffed. (n15)*

Most international students in China are from Asia and Africa. It is a challenge for China to diversify the source countries of international students (4/30). In particular, it is hard to recruit from the West, such as Western Europe, North America and Australia. In addition, the quality of international students recruited to China is lower than domestic Chinese students. Some faculties and departments in Chinese universities take them as a liability (6/30). The leadership of some universities may not emphasize internationalization as a central institutional activity (3/30) if the quality is poor:

> *Some departments don't want to take more international students, as they find it hard to educate them. It is also hard to find professors to work as supervisors for graduate students, also due to the poorer quality. The poorer quality may be due to the poor K-12 education students received in their home countries. Some of our courses, for example, Chemistry and Physics, are at a much higher level than their home countries. (n24)*

International enrollment in China is too dependent on scholarship spending, with a limited number of self-financed students (6/30). The small number of self-financed students from Asia and Africa is also declining due to the economic challenges of these countries during and after the pandemic. This is another major challenge, as China's post-COVID-19 economic recovery is slower than expected, which may mean reduced government scholarship opportunities (10/30). As we mentioned in the literature review, the Chinese goal in international student education is international diplomacy, and thus the economic motivation is weak, as there are limited opportunities for international students to work in China after graduation given the current national policy framework (6/30):

> *International student education does not seem to be relevant to the Chinese economy. We don't make money from their tuition. We don't want to retain them to work after graduation. Many Chinese people don't understand why we are doing it. (n20)*

There is some public pushback on the government's scholarship spending on international students (7/30), not understanding why China spends so much money on foreign students while there are still so many poor people in China. Chinese domestic students sometimes do not understand why international students' dorm conditions are better than theirs. Some international educators also mentioned that some Chinese people still hold racism toward international students of darker color (4/30) who are the majority of the international student population in China.

Chinese as a medium of instruction for most programs (despite some English-taught programs specially designed to attract international students) is another major barrier to international

enrollment in China (14/30). For students with no or weak Chinese competence, it takes time for them to become proficient enough to excel in Chinese-taught programs. The English-taught programs and courses may be of poorer quality due to hardships in finding qualified instructors.

> *The language barrier is a big challenge. Chinese is hard to learn. It takes time. Sometimes students may have HSK5 (which is the Chinese language requirement to enter into a Chinese-taught program), but they still struggle academically. (n22)*

The strict quarantine measures during the Pandemic in China broke the momentum of international mobility of students, and the recovery of the momentum will take time (5/30). There is still fear of international travel for both Chinese students and students who want to study in China. Table 2 is a summary of the major "repel" factors for China and their times of mention:

Table 2. "Repel" Factors of International Student Education in China

"Repel" Factors	Frequency Count
Bad press of China	17/30
Chinese as a medium of instruction	14/30
Quality and reputation of Chinese higher education	13/30
Slow post-COVID-19 economic recovery	10/30
Lack of public support	7/30
Weak economic motivation	7/30
Over-dependence on scholarship	6/30
Poor quality of students	6/30
COVID-19 broke momentum	5/30
Singular sources (Asia and Africa)	4/30

The "Pulling" Opportunities

More than half of the Chinese international educators in this study mentioned that the Chinese national government's support for international student education in China will continue to be strong, due to the need for international education as a tool for China's international diplomacy (16/30). Given the adverse geopolitical environment for China, the government's support for international education might even further strengthen. The government policy support, according to the participants, might include more opportunities for international students to work while studying in China, more incentives for them to start their businesses, and more opportunities to work in Chinese companies upon graduation. Some preferable policies are provided by local Chinese governments as well. The Chinese economy will continue to grow, even if not as fast as in pre-COVID-19 years, which will create good career opportunities for international graduates both in China and in students' home countries, and both in industries and governments (13/30). Many international educators mentioned specifically the "Belt and Road Initiative or BRI", China's global infrastructure development strategy to link China with other Global South countries (Smith, 2021). Chinese companies' global operations are creating a big demand for talents with Chinese knowledge in different parts of the world. Chinese universities have been involved in BRI through collaborative education programs in partnership with governments and industries to train technical and managerial talents for key infrastructure projects (Liu, et al, 2024). The involvement of Chinese universities in BRI has helped attract numerous international students from Global South countries to China (8/30):

With China's fast economic growth, some Chinese companies' investments and operations overseas will grow. While overseas, they will have a greater and greater demand for overseas talents who understand Chinese culture and economy. For example, the desire for students in "Belt and Road" countries to study in China is very strong (n2).

The number and proportion of international enrollment are taken as an indicator of a university's quality and global standing, often tied to government funding, and thus universities in China are in general motivated to recruit and educate international students (6/30). One participant mentioned that having more international students on campus creates opportunities for Chinese domestic students' international exposure and intercultural learning. Another participant wrote:

Most, if not all, Chinese universities emphasize internationalization work. Many universities have made internationalization an important benchmark in evaluating the work of different academic units. More staff and departments are willing and motivated to engage in international work now. (n16)

Though China has challenges in recruiting students from the Western world, there is an increasing interest from developing countries to learn about the Chinese model of economic development (9/30). Two Chinese colleagues believe that the past ten years of work in international education have also helped improve the world's understanding of China, particularly people from the Global South. Often this happens through word of mouth:

As China gets stronger, and the Chinese people get richer, it may create a curiosity among other countries, developing countries in the Third World in particular, about the Chinese path of modernity. They will want to come to learn what is happening. How did China pull so many people out of poverty? (n4)

The quality of Chinese higher education will get better, creating better global recognition (6/30). This is another opportunity. Similarly, the quality of management and services in international student education will also get better (6/30). Some participants mentioned that China is working right now to raise the academic threshold in international recruitment with the aim of improving the quality and reputation of international education in China.

Some countries in the poorer regions of the world have invited Chinese universities to establish branch campuses there, hoping to introduce the Chinese model of higher education. We are supposed to offer courses in Chinese, taught by Chinese academic staff. They will provide venues and take care of recruitment. (n24)

As one of the oldest cultures and civilizations in the world, China is believed to have some cultural appeal to international students (6/30). International students in China share a common curiosity about Chinese culture and society, according to many participants.

The world needs both the Yin and the Yang side. Though the Yang side, the masculine side represented by the Western culture, is often considered desirable, the Yin side, the gentle side represented by Eastern culture, is indispensable. Global development needs a force different from the Western Yang culture in order to achieve sustainability. Thus there is a necessity for Eastern cultures to exist and to spread. (n19)

Low living costs and ample scholarship opportunities are mentioned by seven participants as a pull factor (7/30). Safety in China, with strict gun control and drug control, is also mentioned as a positive condition (4/30). Some believe that Mandarin Chinese will become a more popular and more mainstream language in the future (3/30). One person mentioned that the English proficiency level

of professors in China is improving too, making more English-taught programs with better quality possible (n14). Finally, two participants mentioned that, with the declining Chinese population, Chinese university seats might need to be filled by more international students down the road (n5 and n23). Table 3 is a summary of all "pull" factors and their weight for international education in China:

Table 3. "Pull" Factors of International Student Education in China

"Pull" Factors	Frequency Count
Government support	16/30
Economic growth	13/30
Appeal to Global South	9/30
Institutional motivation	6/30
Low cost and scholarship	7/30
Improving quality of Chinese higher education	6/30
Appeal of Chinese culture	6/30
Safety	4/30
Chinese becoming more popular	3/30
Declining Chinese population	2/30

The Future Prospect

This group of Chinese international educators are "*mildly optimistic*" (n22) about the prospect of the next ten years. It will be a difficult task to improve the quality of students recruited, while not sacrificing the number of enrollment (16/30). International student education in China is mandated by the government to improve the integration of international students on campus, but it will be a difficult process and it will take some time to achieve (7/30). Due to the slower-than-expected recovery of the Chinese economy, there might be an emphasis on the recruitment and education of tuition-paying international students in the next while, which is not easy to achieve (4/30). One participant wrote that "*a more self-supported student population will be one of the KPIs of internationalization*" (n29).

> In the next decade, the number of international students is expected to recover, as it has gone down due to the impact of the Pandemic. I reckon that it won't go back to the pre-pandemic level very soon because of the economic, political and a few other factors. (n26)

Despite the challenges in the short term, Chinese international educators in this study feel more confident in the long term. The group believes that the Chinese government's support for international student education will be consistent in general (11/30), and the future demand for international and intercultural learning around the world will be strong (7/30):

> In the post-COVID era, Chinese universities and universities in other countries alike are searching for new opportunities for international collaboration. Taking my university as an example, in 2023 alone, the volume of delegations going out and coming in, the new collaborative agreements and academic exchanges are 2-3 times the pre-pandemic level. There is an earnest need for international exchanges from the governments, universities as well as individual professors and students. (n17)

Though it is hard to grow enrollment from Western countries, international enrollment from non-Western cultures is likely to continue to grow, given China's active involvement with these regions (6/30).

> For some regions and countries, such as the countries along the "Belt and Road Initiative", there will be strong scholarship support and the enrollment will grow to support Chinese companies' operations in these regions. For some other countries, improving bilateral relations with China will drive student mobility to China. For example, the Saudi government scholarship programs encourage more Saudi students to study in China. We saw an increase in Saudi students. (n7)

The participants are also positive that the Chinese image, together with the quality and recognition of Chinese higher education, will improve in the future (5/30). Table 4 is a summary of the short-term challenges and the reasons for long-term confidence:

Table 4. Short-Term Challenges and Reasons for Long-Term Confidence

Challenges in the Short Term	Frequency Count	Reasons for Confidence in the Long Term	Frequency Count
The need to improve quality of recruitment and education	16/30	Consistent Chinese government support	11/30
The need to change the service model and improve integration	7/30	Future demand for international education	7/30
The need to recruit from Western countries	5/30	Strong interest and demand from developing countries	6/30
The need to increase number of self-financed students	4/30	Improvement of Chinese higher education	5/30

Discussion

The "pull and repel" factors analysis conducted in this study is a supply-side analysis, focusing on both the advantages and disadvantages of China as a host country of international students. Different from the conventional "pull and push" analysis which sees international student mobility more as a politically neutral event (Findlay, 2011), the "pull and repel" analysis fully recognizes that international student mobility is a purposeful national strategy of the host country to pursue desired national interests. The "pull and repel" analysis focuses on, not individual students' choices and decision-making process, but host countries' national policies with regard to international student education, i.e. what goals they want to achieve and how they go about achieving them. Different from traditional host countries of international students, such as the US, the UK, Australia and Canada, who pursue international education as an export industry and as a platform for talent acquisition (Liu, 2023), international student education is pursued in China as part of its international diplomacy (Mulvey & Lo, 2021; Xu, 2023). The "bad press of China" is identified in this study as the number one "repel" factor for the country's international recruitment. International student education in China is in the business of winning the hearts and minds of people from around the world. Improving the global image and global understanding of China, by reducing the "bad press of China", is the ultimate goal (Mulvey & Lo, 2021; Xu, 2023).

International educators in this study have identified "government support" (16/30) as the number one "pull" factor. To achieve its international diplomacy goal, the Chinese government has been providing scholarships to attract international students. For this reason, China's "economic growth" (13/30) is considered the second most important "pull" factor and the "slow post-COVID-19 economic recovery" (10/30) is considered the fourth biggest "repel" factor. A better economic

situation would enable more scholarship spending on international recruitment. Indirectly, a strong Chinese economy would mean that students' knowledge of the Chinese language and culture can translate into better employment opportunities. A strong Chinese economy would also mean more Chinese investment in its higher education system, resulting in better quality and reputation. The Chinese economic prospect will continue to be the biggest factor in determining China's success in attracting more international students. Though China may not repeat the double-digit economic growth in the post-pandemic era, its economy will most probably continue to grow. Despite many predictions of China's collapse over the past decades (e.g. Tyler, 2001), the Chinese system has shown much resilience, being able to transform itself and solve pressing issues. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts that China will contribute 22.6% of the world's economic growth from 2023 to 2028, followed by India's 12.9% (Tanzi, 2023). Confidence in China's long-term economic outlook gives international educators in this study confidence about the long-term prospects for China's international enrollment.

When evaluating the success of international education in China, as part of its international diplomacy, it is important to distinguish two tracks – one track being China's success in engaging the developing world, and the other being China's success in engaging the developed West. International student education in China will continue its success as a mechanism for China to engage the Global South countries, through projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Smith, 2021). The pronounced goal is to build a community of common destiny in the Global South (Wang, et al, 2021), representing over 80% of the world's population (Mahbubani, 2018). Several members of the group in this study mentioned that their universities are involved in joint education programs in China to train students from the Global South to work on key infrastructure projects in major industries (e.g. Liu, et al., 2024). In the second track, China's effort in international diplomacy with the Global North by attracting Western students to study in China has been challenging and will continue to be challenging. The decoupling policy adopted by the US and its allies in the West toward China, due to geopolitical tensions, economic competition, and national security concerns, has had a huge impact on academic collaboration and student mobility (see e.g. Mok et al, 2024). To counter such negative impacts and continue to pursue its international diplomatic goal, China may actually step up efforts to attract and entice more students from the West to go study in China. As for Western countries, the best way to address security concerns in interactions with China is not to reduce collaboration, but to increase understanding and expertise on China. Capacities for mutual understanding and cooperative problem-solving should be increased, not reduced (Cai, 2023). For this reason, it is advisable for Western countries to maintain their flow of students to study in China.

This study has served to show that the "pull and repel" analysis can be a useful approach to identify, compare and contrast the "pull" and "repel" factors of a particular host country. One obvious policy implication of a "pull and repel" analysis is for the host country to amplify "pull" factors and control "repel" factors. In the case of China, the "pull" factors that need to be amplified include China's appeal to Global South students, low cost and scholarship availability, and safety. The "repel" factors that need to be controlled include the lack of public support, poor quality of international recruits, and weak economic motivation. The "pull and repel" analysis helps us understand where our future effort should be allocated. One interesting finding in this study is that some factors appear on both the "pull" list and the "repel" list. We have already mentioned above that the prospect of China's continued economic growth is considered an important "pull" factor, but the slow post-COVID-19 economic recovery is a "repel" factor, at least for the short term. The quickly improving quality of Chinese higher education is a "pull" factor, particularly for students from Global South countries, but the reputation of Chinese higher education becomes a "repel" factor when it comes to recruiting students from the Global North. Chinese as a medium of instruction in higher education in China is identified as the second most important "repel" factor, as Chinese is not a Lingua Franca like English and learners of Chinese as a second language are few, but the increasing popularity of Chinese, due to the rise of Chinese economy, is also seen as a "pull" factor for students who aim to

have careers in relation to China. These factors, appearing on both lists, are the most impactful but also the most uncertain factors that can tilt both ways.

Limitations

There are some limitations in this study that need to be acknowledged. In the first place, the participants of this study represent a single stakeholder group who are support staff in international education. Other stakeholder groups, such as faculty members, senior administrators, students (both international and domestic students), and the general public outside campus, are not included. Secondly, the data for this study are drawn solely from participants' written interviews. Without other possible sources of data, such as policy documents and on-site observations, triangulation is hard to achieve. Thirdly, this study provides a snapshot of international student education in China as it stood at the end of 2023, which limits its ability to capture changes or trends over time. A promising direction for future research is to conduct a longitudinal study examining how China will manage its "repel" factors and enhance its "pull" factors through policy initiatives. This should ideally involve data from multiple stakeholder groups and be collected in diverse ways.

Conclusion

This study was conducted among 30 Chinese university administrators in international education to investigate the future outlook of China as a designation of international students in the post-COVID-19 era. To this end, the "pull and repel" analysis has served as a rigorous tool in this study to glean the strengths and weaknesses of China as a host country. The most important "pull" factors for China include strong government support, economic growth prospects, and China's appeal to Global South students. The most important "repel" factors for China include the bad press of China, Chinese as a medium of instruction, and the quality/reputation of Chinese higher education. Participants of this study anticipate some challenges in international recruitment for China in the short term but remain confident for the long term. One obvious policy implication of the "pull and repel" analysis for host countries is to amplify "pull" factors and control "repel" factors. There awaits future research to study what policy initiatives will be adopted in China to manage the "repel" factors and how the dynamics between the "pull" and "repel" factors in China shall change in the next decade.

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Integrating HOTs in Reading Comprehension in Inclusive Classrooms: Implications from a Dyslexia Study

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Abstract: *This article describes the qualitative phase of a larger intervention study, where pupils with learning disabilities (nine dyslexic pupils) were engaged in a pedagogically blended 'Reread-Adapt and Answer-Comprehend' (RAAC) and Theatre Art activities to enhance Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTs) in reading comprehension. Data from pupils' answers in the reading comprehension passages, interviews with the Special Education Needs (SEN) teacher and observations were collected. Qualitative analysis based upon pre-determined categories of learning strategies from literature revealed pupils' application of HOTs in reading comprehension. Drawing from this study, the importance of addressing HOTs in reading comprehension among mainstream and SEN pupils and other implications for inclusive classrooms are discussed.*

Keywords: Inclusive Classrooms, HOTs in Reading Comprehension, RAAC-Theatre Art Intervention

Introduction

As in many education systems around the world, in Malaysia, Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, et al., 1956) is used to formulate learning outcomes to determine the depth of learning (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The hierarchy of six cognitive skills in the Taxonomy progresses in a linear manner, from simple to complex, where *remembering, understanding,* and *applying* are considered as the lower thinking skills, whereas *analysing, evaluating* and *creating* are the higher-order thinking skills (HOTs). Examples of component cognitive skills of *analysing* are critical thinking, organising and integrating; for *evaluating* are hypothesising, critiquing and monitoring, and for *creating*, designing, constructing and planning.

Reading comprehension is the ability to interact and understand text in reading materials. This ability is necessary for learning in all fields be it languages, science or mathematics (Gregory & Cahill, 2010). For reading comprehension, two interconnected abilities are necessary (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) which are, word recognition (decoding) and language comprehension (understanding the meaning of the words). For both these abilities, HOTs are essential to assist learners in understanding the text, making inferences, connecting the text to other facts and synthesising all that is read to solve problems.

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Inclusive Education

With the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD) in 2006, inclusive education became an international human right, with 164 nations as signatories, including Malaysia. In the Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB - 2013-2025) document, a commitment was made to the value of quality inclusive education, that by 2025, 75% of the Special Education Needs (SEN) pupils who have learning disabilities will become part of the mainstream education. HOTs are also prioritised in the Blueprint although not directly for SEN pupils. To ensure the implementation of the MEB is complex, as it involves state and district education offices and thousands of schools throughout Malaysia. The Curriculum Development Division of the Ministry of Education has prepared the Special Education Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools and the Special Education Standard Curriculum for Secondary Schools (KSSR and KSSM respectively), which was implemented in 2017, aligned to the country's National Education Philosophy and designed to be flexible for the teaching-learning processes in all classrooms.

In Malaysia, special education is accessed in three ways through (i) Special Education Schools (schools only for SEN pupils), (ii) Special Education Integration Programmes (mainstream schools which have separate classes for SEN pupils) and (iii) Inclusive Education Programmes (schools where SEN pupils are placed in the same classes with mainstream pupils) (Nasir & Efendi, 2016). Additionally, Malaysia's inclusive programmes have two pathways: full and partial. Full programmes mean that pupils with learning disabilities learn with mainstream pupils for *all* subjects including co-curriculum activities. Partial programmes mean that pupils with learning disabilities learn with mainstream pupils for *selected* subjects and co-curricular activities. Although as noted in the MEB enough opportunities are provided for all pupils with disabilities, the resources and facilities provided through the three programmes are limited (Othman et al., 2022).

The report from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2022) on the official number of pupils with learning disabilities is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Type of Schools and Pupil Statistics with Learning Difficulties in Malaysia (2022)

Type of School	Level of Pupils	Total Number of Students with Learning Disabilities (LD)
Special Education Government Schools	Primary	492
	Secondary	721
Special Education Integrated Programme in Government Schools	Primary	44, 116
	Secondary	35,330
Special Education Inclusive Programme in Government Schools	N/A	N/A

Source: Department of Statistics Malaysia (2022)

Overall, rapid progress has been made related to special education in Malaysia since 1990 (Muhamad Nadhir & Alfa Nur Aini, 2016). Table 2 shows the chronology of events from 1990, beginning with the introduction of a special training programme for teachers of SEN in 1990, until the Zero Reject Policy (ZRP) introduced by the Ministry of Education in 2018.

Table 2. Progress of Special Education from 1990 in Malaysia

Time	Action / Policy /
1990	Rapid development of special education in Malaysia (e.g., Development of segregated teacher preparation programme for mainstream and special educators)
1995	Establishment of the Special Education Department in 1995 (currently known as Special Education Division)
1996	A chapter on special education was included in the Education Act 1996
1997	Introduction of the Education Rules (Special Education) by the Ministry of Education in 1997 – included three special education programmes, namely the special school (35 schools), the integrated programme (2659 schools) and the inclusive programme (3373 schools)
Since 2006	All students registered with the special education programmes are eligible to receive monthly allowance since 2006
Since 2008	The adoption of the Persons with Disabilities Act in 2008 – persons with disabilities are not to be excluded from the formal education system
2013	New education regulations for special education were introduced by Ministry of Education to replace the Education Rules (Special Education) 1997 The inclusion of special education in the Preliminary Report of the National Education Blueprint 2013-2025 - two types of inclusive education - full inclusion and partial inclusion.
2018	Zero reject policy (ZRP) for Students with Special Needs (SEN) was introduced by Ministry of Education

Source: Compiled from Muhamad Nadhir & Alfa Nur Aini (2016); Nur Kamariah et al., (2022); Suliati Asri (2023).

Reading Comprehension Disorder

Pupils with Reading Comprehension Disorder (RCD) have trouble learning to recognize, read and pronounce words, but the dominant challenge is in grasping meaning from text. Conditions related to RCD are attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyslexia and other learning disabilities (Hendren, et al., 2018).

Importance of Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive human activity and is a challenge to teach, measure and research (Elleman & Oslund, 2019). Numerous cognitive processes are involved such as word reading ability, inference generation, prior knowledge, working memory and many more (Perfetti, et al., 2005). In comparison to all other academic skills, reading comprehension is looked upon as the foundation. Besides interacting with and understanding the text, reading comprehension involves other HOTs such as deductive and critical thinking and goes beyond phonological awareness and helps pupils understand complex concepts (Escar, 2022). Proficiency in understanding written material is vital cutting across all subjects. Reading comprehension is foundational for critical and creative thinking, analytical skills and effective problem-solving (Spolander, 2023). Thus, acquiring reading comprehension skills will prove invaluable for learning subjects, especially in inclusive classrooms where SEN pupils and normal pupils learn together.

Tackling Reading Comprehension Disorder

Numerous interventions have been tested to assist pupils with RCD conditions such as dyslexia to improve their reading comprehension. These interventions are divided into phonological interventions, to assist SEN pupils to associate letter symbols with their sounds (Dyslexia UK, 2023). Second, there are morphological training interventions, to guide SEN pupils' understanding of the structure of words as, "combinations of smaller meaningful units, known as morphemes, and the ability to manipulate them" (Melloni & Vender, 2022, p.1). Third, is the cognitive training interventions which are usually based on visual and spatial attention, and memory abilities (Caldani et al, 2021). Fourth is the multisensory approach, (visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic activities), which engages various parts of the brain and provides SEN pupils more ways to understand, remember and recall what they have learnt (American University Washington, 2023). Snowling et al. (2020) stated that the multisensory approach provides a more meaningful experience. At present assistive technology approaches have also been conducted integrating all four above-mentioned interventions (Al-Dokhny et al., 2022). Providing adequate remediation for reading comprehension is a growing issue for pupils with dyslexia and other learning disabilities (Protopapas & Parrila, 2019).

Novianti and Syihabuddin (2021) found that the phonological instruction in their study helped elementary dyslexic pupils raise their phonological awareness, reading and spelling skills. It has been found that specific morphological interventions facilitate children with learning disabilities to focus on word structure to improve reading skills (Bowers et al., 2010). The multi-sensory approach has also been found to improve reading ability in students with dyslexia (Lopes et al., 2020), and among students with other disabilities (Gharaibeh & Dukmak, 2022).

In Malaysia, several intervention studies have been conducted specific to dyslexia. Lee (2010) used the Davis Model, which has three components, namely, the Orientation Counselling procedure to correct visual perceptual problems, the Symbol Mastery procedure to aid with problems of reversals, and the Reading Exercises to help in word recognition, to intervene perceptual problems and word recognition in a single case study. Majzub et al. (2012) in another study conducted a multisensory programme among dyslexic students aged between 8 to 9 years of age attending remedial classes, using a quasi-experimental research design. The results indicated significant differences in alphabet identification and alphabet mastery. Subramanian et al. (2013), applied the multi-senses explication activities (such as the Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, Tactile -VAKT, Gillingham and Fernald methods) and language games in word mastery for the national language Malay among 5 primary school students aged between 8 to 9 years. This approach was found to trigger an active learning environment for the students and helped with the mastery of words in the language. Intervention programmes based on technology have been conducted. For example, *MyLexics* an educational courseware, was developed and tested by Abdullah et al. (2009) to teach the Malay language to dyslexic pupils. Through multimedia elements, dyslexic pupils can independently and interactively first learn the 'alphabet', then construct 'syllables' by combining the 'alphabets' and finally combining the 'syllables' to construct 'words. Lee (2019) also designed and developed the intervention of a multisensory programme *MyBaca*, a Malay word recognition program for dyslexic pupils. The programme targeted pupils' decoding, reading fluency and motivation.

Special education teachers opine that pedagogies such as multi-sensory approaches and assistive technology tools using mobile learning applications can be effective among pupils with learning disabilities. This approach has already been found effective with mainstream pupils. However, to date, there are no mobile learning applications for learning disabilities based on the Special Education Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools and the Special Education Standard Curriculum for Secondary Schools in the country (Wai, et al., 2022). Nevertheless, organisations such as the Dyslexic Association of Malaysia or *Persatuan Dyslexia Malaysia* (PDM) supports dyslexic pupils with its multi-sensory approach module at its centres (The Sun, 30 October 2023).

One clear need was pointed out by Nurul Anis et al (2018), that although numerous studies have been conducted related to RCD among SEN pupils, no study among pupils with learning disabilities in Malaysia has investigated beyond literacy and linguistic abilities to include cognitive functions

underlying the challenges in the learning process. Thus, this article describes an intervention which tried to fill this gap using a blended pedagogical remediation approach of 'the Reread-Adapt and Answer-Comprehend' (RAAC) and Theatre Art instruction, to examine its effect on integrating HOTs in reading comprehension of pupils with dyslexia.

Rationale of the Study

For successful inclusive education which accommodates various abilities in the same classroom, creative pedagogy empowering flexible learning environments is important. This article focuses on pedagogy, which is 'the central means through which the principle of inclusion is put into action within an education system' (UNESCO IBE 2009, p. 22). In addition, this study views reading comprehension as a basic skill for all pupils, not only for learning languages but for all subject matter (Gregory & Cahill, 2010). Furthermore, since HOTs are prioritised in the Malaysian Education Blueprint, the focus of the article will be on learning strategies through a planned learning environment (RAAC and Theatre Art) for acquiring HOTs in reading comprehension. The implications of the findings from the study conducted among dyslexic students will be extrapolated for the inclusive classroom.

RAAC and Theatre Art in Reading Comprehension

William J. Therrien (2004) developed the RAAC 7-step intervention which consists of well researched components, namely, repeated reading and question generation. Students reread passages aloud until they satisfy a performance criterion. The reading is done purposefully to adapt and answer story structure prompts that bring about question generation (Therrien & Hughes 2008). The strategic instruction process 'Reread-Adapt and Answer-Comprehend' (RAAC) intervention incorporates the following seven steps as sequences (see Appendix A)

Alfassi et al. (2009) found that the RAAC strategy was more effective in promoting reading comprehension among pupils with learning disabilities than traditional methods and observed that "the findings challenged the common perception that literacy is an organic impossibility for people defined as intellectually disabled" (p. 291). Further research showed that teachers found the RAAC intervention increased decoding fluency and reading comprehension for school-age children with learning disabilities (Hua et al., 2012; Schirmer et al., 2012).

Theatre Art in this paper is an adaptation of the Readers' Theatre where a script is recited by the teacher, followed by the RCD pupils bringing the words to life through facial expression, and voice intonation without the use of costumes or stage settings (Mastrothanasis et al., 2023). Integrating creative teaching approaches and changing the way instruction is designed and delivered can benefit diverse learners (McMahon et al., 2004). This type of teaching is an evidenced-based approach used to scaffold students' reading fluency, oral language fluency, and expression. Corcoran and Davis' (2005) research of Theatre Art among second and third-grade students with learning disabilities reported an average of more words read correctly after implementing Theatre Art. A recent study by Fälth et al. (2023), found that a multimodal reading training programme intervention in Sweden and Croatia, improved normal pupils' literacy development, including decoding, spelling, and reading comprehension. Young and Rasinski (2009) also stated that, "children are more likely to practice or rehearse if they know that they will be performing a reading for an audience" (p. 5). Pupils with learning disabilities using scripts during reading improved in word recognition and comprehension, and became more fluent compared to the traditional approach (Rasinski et al., 2015).

Slade (2012) found that teachers' early use of Theatre Art on migrant pupils increased their active engagement with the texts and confirmed that Theatre Art is a powerful, analytical, and educational tool that enhanced literacy skills when introduced early. More recently, Kelzang et al. (2023) conducted action research among students in rural Bhutan found that Theatre Art enhanced reading skills as well as generated enthusiasm, raised confidence and motivated mainstream pupils.

Blending RAAC and Theatre Art

Thus far no teaching approach can be said to be 'the best practice' for teaching HOTs in reading comprehension to pupils with learning disabilities such as dyslexia. Dyslexic children are diverse (as in other learning disabilities) and perhaps to enhance reading comprehension, two instructional approaches can be combined. Block, et al. (2008) found that by using more than one instructional approach, dyslexic children are better engaged which reinforces comprehension. A mixed method study by Brinda (2008) which combined Theatre Art and text reading found that aliterate children connected with the Theatre Art characters, and this led to the children's willingness to participate and engage well in the lessons. Certo and Brinda (2011) in their research, had sixth-grade urban middle school classes partner with a semi-professional theatre company and used literature adaptations in a Theatre Art performance to assist pupils with reading challenges. They found that this evoked an aesthetic and emotional response in pupils that reading the literature alone did not. Strickland et al, (2013), in their extensive review of literature on repeated reading studies among elementary students with learning disabilities, reported that special education teachers should rethink teaching approaches and use reading programmes such as RAAC to enhance reading fluency and comprehension skills, and additionally use the programme in combination with other interventions. The present article reports a combination of RAAC and Theatre Art intervention study.

Theoretical Framework

The research in the study is about an intervention among pupils with dyslexia through the blending of RAAC and Theatre Art. According to Menghini et al., (2011), the underlying problem for reading comprehension involves a combination of factors. Nonetheless, phonological processing is still believed to be the core problem affecting dyslexic pupils and pupils with other learning disabilities who have difficulty with words (Ramus & Szenkovits, 2009).

Matching graphemes (combination of letters) to phonemes (sounds) of words in a printed text into speech is decoding, while listening comprehension is the ability to recognise speech sounds to understand language from spoken words (Hoover & Gough, 1990). The Simple View of Reading Theory (SVR) proposed by Gough and Tunmer (1986) states that reading comprehension is the combination of decoding skills and listening comprehension and that both must act together for verbalising reading. According to Klingneret al. (2010), among dyslexic and other learners with disabilities, the challenge is to recognise difficult words in print (decoding), determine the meaning from the text (listening comprehension), while at the same time acquiring the language through which that content is taught (reading comprehension). Both decoding and listening comprehension skills are teachable (Kamhi, 2007). In the present study the decoding skills are taught by using the RAAC intervention and the listening comprehension skills are acquired through Theatre Art activities. The comprehension processes put forward by Gregory and Cahill (2010) namely, questioning, using prior knowledge and schemas, inferencing, visualizing, and making connections will underpin the SVR model.

The concept of HOTs in this study is based upon the hierarchical progression of skills embedded in the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, by Bloom et al. (1956) and revised by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). This aligns with the interpretation of HOTs in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2035). When a child upon encountering a problem, can explain and analyse the problem; put forward ideas to plan for action; evaluate the ideas, make a choice, and create a solution, he or she has demonstrated HOTs ably (Kamarulzaman, 2014). Based on the above discussion, the researchers put forward the theoretical framework shown in Figure 1.
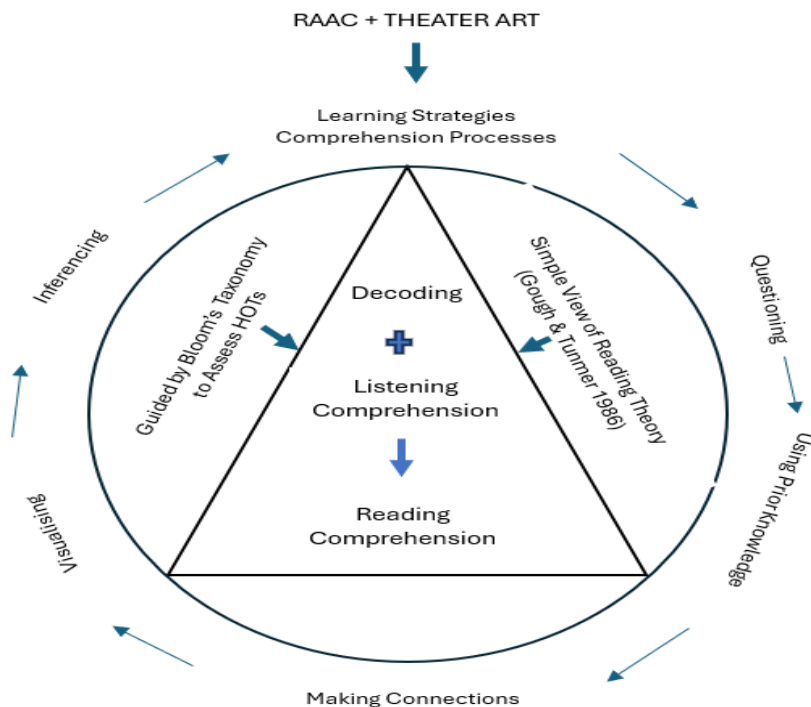
Figure 1. Theoretical Framework for the RAAC + Theatre Art Approach.

Source: Constructed by authors

The Dyslexia Example

This article discusses a part of a larger study which investigated the effectiveness of a blended RAAC – Theatre Art approach to integrate HOTs in reading comprehension among dyslexic pupils. This article will briefly describe the effectiveness of the blended approach, but the focus will be on the learning strategies of pupils with dyslexia related to HOTs in reading comprehension.

Method

The primary dependent variable was the change in reading comprehension as measured by the reading comprehension score (RCS) of questions answered correctly on the application of the independent variables of RAAC and Theatre Art. A multiple baseline across-subject design was used to investigate the effects of the intervention. The study identified and carried out the research in a learning environment which was the PDM.

A case sample was necessary for this study because pupils identified as dyslexic by child psychologists were a specific characteristic necessary for involvement in the study. Nine pupils at the PDM were selected through a purposive sampling process to participate in the research. The pupils were from the intermediate to advanced classes. The criteria for selection of the participants for the research included (i) pupils who were tested for and identified as having dyslexia through formal assessments, (ii) those identified as ESL-developing readers who have acquired fundamental reading skills such as sound-letter relationships and blending words. The idea that dyslexic pupils who have not acquired these fundamental reading skills should not participate in repeated reading was stressed by Therrien and Kubina (2006), and (iii) students who have returned the required consent forms.

The research proposal was evaluated by the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee and approved (UM. TNC2/UMREC-372). The nine pupils (six boys and three girls aged between eight and twelve years old) returned informed consent forms signed by the parents/guardians agreeing to participate in the research.

The study first established a baseline phase (a minimum of three data points) using the traditional teaching method of direct instruction and measured how the dyslexic pupils performed over several sessions. The data points refer to the scores for reading comprehension for each session. Then the intervention of RAAC and Theatre Art instruction began and was later followed by the maintenance base. Each phase was introduced separately, sequentially, and randomly. The key factor in a multiple baseline across-subject design was that the intervention was introduced at a different time for each participant so that some participants continued in the baseline condition while others commenced the intervention condition (Rakap, 2015). This is called the time-staggered approach where the intervention is implemented to one participant at a time, where each participant receives the intervention at different times, thus eliminating the element of coincidence for changes occurring to the dependent variable and ensuring the effect was due to the intervention (Perone & Hursh, 2013).

By introducing the intervention phases in a staggered fashion, the effects could be replicated in a way that demonstrated experimental control (Bulté, & Onghena, 2009). The design also allowed a comparison between the baseline phase and intervention phase and provided for replication within an experiment but did not require the reversal of intervention effects or the withdrawal of interventions. Each dyslexic pupil's data was compared between the intervention and baseline phase, resulting in each pupil acting as their control (Kazdin, 2015).

The nine dyslexic pupils selected were assigned to three groups. Each group comprised three participants. The researchers conferred with the principal, administrators, and the special education teacher on the selection. The special education teacher proposed that the pupils be grouped according to their PDM-identified levels, which are advanced high, advanced low and intermediate.

Type of Data and Instructional Materials

The reading materials and comprehension questions used in the research comprised a selection of 30 text passages created and designed for use by government schools in Malaysia. These reading passages, prepared to meet the reading levels of the dyslexic pupils in schools, have been validated by subject matter experts. The researchers modified the text passages from this database of English comprehension tests from the various primary schools in Kuala Lumpur together with the special education teacher. The modified passages were then sent to two subject matter experts and two other special education English language teachers for validation. These text passages were randomly assigned to the baseline, intervention, and maintenance phases.

During the three phases, observations were carried out weekly by the researcher and a peer. Interviews with the teacher probed opinions about the RAAC-Theatre Art approach and how the pupils learnt. The main source of data was the pupils' answers in the passages used for instruction.

Baseline Phase - Decoding

The quantitative data gathered were the reading comprehension scores (RCS). In the baseline phase, the special education teacher and pupil with dyslexia (PWDy) sat face-to-face across a table facing each other and the teacher narrated the text passage to the PWDy. The teacher then handed the pupil a copy of the text passage and gave instructions as follows, "*Read this story the best you can. Pay attention to what you are reading, as you will need to answer some questions. If you get stuck, I will tell you the word so you can keep reading*." (Observation Notes, Baseline Phase (BP))

Five questions were asked after each reading of the text passage. Three were literal questions which required the participants to remember or understand the text and two were HOTs questions

that required the pupils to analyze and infer from the text. The PWDy was asked to provide written answers to the comprehension questions from the passage. Participants' use of oral answers to supplement their written answers was counted as correct if the participant answered correctly without prompting within 5 seconds (Garwood et al., 2014). The RAAC with Theatre Art intervention was then implemented in the intervention stage to assess the Pupil's RCS to measure any change in the dependent variable.

Intervention Phase – Listening Comprehension

During the intervention sessions, the PWDys were engaged in a blended RAAC and Theatre Art approach, involving aural and oral skills, social interaction, rhythm and pitch skills, fine and gross motor skills and body percussion. Each session was one-on-one with the teacher. The PWDy was given the reading passage and a cue card with questions (see Appendix B).

Time in the Field

The data collection ran for 18 weeks (Monday to Friday) through the baseline, intervention and maintenance phases. Four weeks after the last intervention, the teacher conducted a follow-up maintenance phase for all participants, with four sessions for each participant.

Training of Special Education Teacher

The special education teacher employed by the PDM was assigned to coordinate and institute the RAAC with Theatre Art intervention. The special education teacher is certified and has completed the Dyslexia Training course offered at the PDM and has been trained in the use of Theatre Art by an expert from the Linguist Centre in Kuala Lumpur. Nevertheless, the teacher was given a further three days of training by the researchers to implement the Blended RAAC and Theatre Art Approach.

Analysis of Data

Horner et al., (2005) highlighted the importance of visual analysis in single-subject research, which involves level, trend and variability. To examine levels, the data points for the dependent variable are scrutinsed to observe changes from the baseline to the intervention phases. The pattern or direction of the data points can also be viewed to determine either an increasing or decreasing trend. The length of time in which the intervention demonstrates an impact is referred to as the latency of change (Manolov & Onghena, 2022).

In addition, the researchers first collected and analyzed information on the participants' reading comprehension scores for both literal and HOTs questions and then separately analyzed the HOTs construct. For this reason, the data collected was dichotomized into literal and HOTs questions. Improvement Rate Data (IRD) was used to calculate the performance of HOTs in reading comprehension This is a simple calculation of the per cent of improvement on the RCS of HOTs questions during the intervention performance over the baseline RCS of HOTs questions (Parker et al., 2009), which has been proven effective in research. Following this, a simple effect size calculation was done.

For the qualitative analysis, the three data sources namely, the participants' written answers in the passages, interview excerpts and observation excerpts were triangulated based on the pre-determined themes for reading comprehension learning strategies put forward by Gregory and Cahill (2010) namely, questioning, using prior knowledge and schemas, inferencing, visualizing and making connections. The researchers observed how the participating PWDys progressed through the learning of HOTs in reading comprehension through RAAC with Theatre Art instruction based upon these pre-determined themes for comprehension processes from literature.

Results

The scores of mean and standard deviations for the baseline, intervention and maintenance phases were calculated to indicate improvement or otherwise of all the nine participants (Table 3). Group 1 was made up of PWDys categorized by PDM as Level Advanced High, Group 2 categorized PWDys as Level Advanced Low, and Group 3 categorized as PWDs Level Intermediate.

Table 3. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations (SD) Across the Three Phases for Reading Comprehension

Group 1	Baseline		Intervention		Maintenance	
Pupil	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1	4.00	1.15	4.88	1.25	6.50	0.58
2	5.00	1.41	6.38	1.74	6.50	0.58
3	3.50	1.29	4.25	1.04	6.00	0.82
Group 2	Baseline		Intervention		Maintenance	
Pupil	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
4	4.00	0.63	4.83	1.17	5.67	0.58
5	3.50	0.84	5.50	0.55	6.00	0.82
6	3.83	0.98	6.00	0.63	6.00	0.82
Group 3	Baseline		Intervention		Maintenance	
Pupil	Mean	SD	Mean	Pupil	Mean	SD
7	4.50	1.07	5.75	1.26	6.25	0.50
8	3.62	0.52	3.75	0.96	4.50	0.58
9	3.25	0.89	5.00	0.82	5.75	0.96

In the baseline phase, the mean scores for all nine PWDys were 5.00 and below. Pupil 2 scored the highest mean 5.00 ± 1.41 among all the PWDys. Pupil 9 scored the lowest mean score of 3.25 ± 0.89. During the intervention phase, there was an increase in mean score for all PWDys with Pupil 2 being the top scorer at 6.38 ± 1.74 and Pupil 8 having the lowest 3.75 ± 0.96. In the maintenance phase, the levels did not drop but instead increased further with Pupil 1 showing a mean of 6.50 ± 0.58 and Pupil 8 with a score of 4.50 ± 0.58. These patterns of performance strongly suggested that the independent variable of RAAC with Theatre Art was responsible for the changes in the dependent variable of the PWDys overall performance. The effect size was found to range from 0.25 to 2.21.

Learning Strategies in a Blended RAAC – Theatre Art Approach

The quantitative phase of the study indicated that all participating PWDys showed gains in reading comprehension scores for HOTs questions. The immediate and significant reading gains during RAAC with Theatre Art lent support for the intervention. RAAC with Theatre Art intervention enhanced PWDys HOTs in reading comprehension through learning strategies to which the paper now turns. The discussion will be based on the pre-determined themes for reading comprehension from literature which are questioning, using prior knowledge and schemas, inferencing, visualizing and making connections (Gregory &Cahill, 2010)

Questioning

RAAC posed questions before reading and this strategy frontloaded a great deal of information about the topic to the PWDys before they read and facilitated them to improve memory, identification and integration of main ideas and overall comprehension (Trabasso & Bouchard, 2002). For example,

during the baseline phase, Pupil 6 could not answer the HOTs questions (Questions 4 and 5, refer to Figure 2). She did not try to answer all the questions and left one space empty.

Figure 2. Pupil 6's Baseline Phase Answers

During the intervention phase, Pupil 6 showed improvement. The rereading of the passages three times of RAAC (decoding) together with listening and the movements of Theatre Art (listening comprehension), propelled her to try answering questions even though she was not sure of the answer, and to answer the questions in complete sentences. RAAC provided the guided practice and corrective feedback she needed. The special education teacher assisted Pupil 6 to answer the questions. The special education teacher directed her by pointing to the passage, *"See if you can find the answer here".* The teacher also scaffolded her learning by asking, *"Try and write more in your answer"* (Observation Notes, P6, Intervention Phase (IP)). She was able to make connections with text (decoding) which was an important skill in helping her to enhance comprehension (Waller & Barrentin, 2015). The pupil wrote in complete sentences with improved grammar structure. In her written work during the intervention (Figure 3) she answered all five questions in complete sentences. In this passage, the HOTs questions were questions 3 and 4.

Figure 3. Pupil 6's Intervention Phase Answers

In her answer to Question 1 during the intervention, she correctly spelt 'shopping' including the additional 'p'. For Question 3. Pupil 6 *analysed* the answer correctly as 'Ali has two brothers'. For Question 4 she answered, 'Because is very dangerouse.' Pupil 6 had reasoned that the security guard told the boys not to play around the escalator because it was very dangerous, although she spelt the word with an additional ending 'e'. This word was not found in the text passage. She could *evaluate* 'danger' of the situation. She also made a serious attempt to improve herself and wrote in complete sentences. Walsh and Sattes (2010) found that questions challenged students to think, and Gallagher (2005) asserted that questions deepened the understanding of the reader. Meng et al. (2012) also stated that questioning helps the special education teacher to maintain the PWDys' participation in the classroom and stimulate them for continuous thinking.

Using Prior Knowledge and Schemas

Recall of prior knowledge before reading is important. Piaget's schema theory indicates that when our thinking connects something 'new' to existing 'old' knowledge we can understand better. When PWDys read a text, they tap into a pattern of knowledge that they already have stored in their brains and make meaning by connecting new ideas to the ones they already have. PWDys use the time to think or rethink while they are reading (decoding) and making meaning. For example, Pupil 9, in his baseline answers, gave one-word answers to questions and did not further explain. Questions 3 and 4 were the HOTs questions. He phonetically spelt eight as 'ate' (Figure 4) and could not infer the age from the number of candles, nor could he explain why Nina was happy.

Figure 4. Pupil 9's Baseline Phase Answers

Nevertheless, the special education teacher knew that Pupil 9 likes to look at images in comic books and loves to draw the characters from these books and imagine himself as the characters "*He (pupil 9) preferred to sit alone and do his cartoon drawings. He would tell stories about the cartoons and was in his own world*" (Teacher Interview 1, BP).

During the RAAC with Theatre Art intervention, the special education teacher constantly prompted and gave examples related to comic stories: "*Try to imagine you are the person or animal in the story*" (Observation Notes, P9, IP). This resonated well with Pupil 9 who immediately participated in the theatre activities. He acted out the text and comprehended the stories better with the movements. The observation "*The teacher guided and prompted pupil 9 to relate what he read to assimilate and accommodate to his existing schema*" (Observation notes, P9, IP) aligned with the actions of the teacher. These dynamic interactions (through listening comprehension) pushed

Pupil 9 to think in more complex and divergent ways, thus promoting HOTs. Dyslexic pupils must be engaged in a manner that reverberates closely with their experiences, motivating to bring out their ability and potential (Norland, 2023).
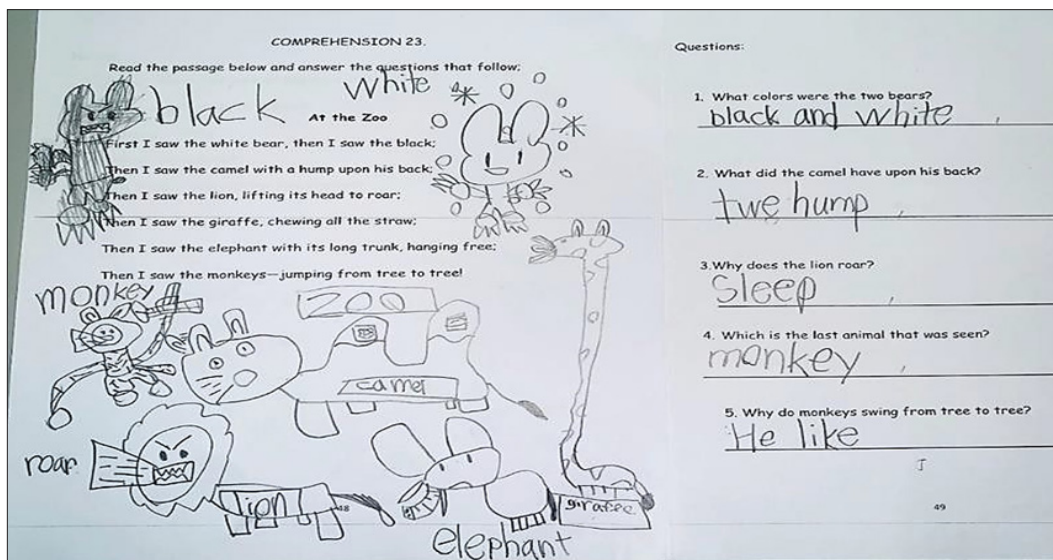

Figure 5. Pupil 9's Intervention Phase Answers

Figure 5 shows Pupil 9's work during Intervention. Pupil 9 drew the animals in the zoo. Drawing helped him relate to his existing schema and he became more engaged with the text passage. Pupil 9 not only stated the colours of the bears but drew the bears, with the bad black bear as gnashing his teeth, and the good white bear as smiling. He also drew stars and circles around the white bear. He also illustrated the lion as fierce looking and noted that the lion "roar(ed)". The monkey was represented as making noise by the triangulated speech bubble. The HOTs questions were questions 3 and 5. Pupil 9 gave unique imaginative conclusions in his answers to Questions 3 and 5, which implied that the lion roared because it was going to sleep, and he concluded that the monkeys were enjoying themselves when they swung from tree to tree. According to Gotlieb et al. (2019), "imagination. the ability to mentally simulate situations and ideas not perceived by the physical senses – lays the foundation for creativity" (p. 709). Thus, it could be that Pupil 9 manifested *creativity* (HOTs) in his answers through the cognitive mechanism of imagination (Majid et a., 2015). Pupil 9 understood stories because he has read comic books and has formed an existing schema for story structure. The intersection of RAAC and Theatre Art creates a conducive environment for dyslexic pupils which enhances cognitive growth and the development of HOTs (Barr, 2019).

Making Inferences

Often PWDys infer answers without being aware they are engaged in inferencing. They often are not able to explain how they refer to explicit information in the text to arrive at their answers. Research shows that when text is repeatedly read, PWDys improve in recognizing words and become more fluent as they develop prosody (Rasinski et al., 2015). In the present study, PWDys recognized clues in the text (decoding) when they acted out the story to gain a deeper understanding of what they were reading. They made inferences about things that were not explicitly stated in the text to conclude the set of facts or circumstances. The example of Pupil 3 is given in Figures 7 and 8.

Figure 6. Pupil 3's Baseline Phase Answers

During the baseline phase, Pupil 3 gave one-word answers and answered verbally. She could not spell well and sometimes had difficulties in forming the alphabet when writing out words. She mixed up the letters in the words and got confused in her writing (Figure 6). Questions 2 and 5 were the HOTs questions. The incorrect answer given in question 2 indicates that Pupil 3 could not infer from the simple information given in the passage.

When exposed to RAAC's rereading and Theatre Art movements to explain the meaning of words, Pupil 3 got excited and started to think better, resulting in her making attempts to search for words and short phrases from the passage (decoding) to answer the questions in full sentences and was also keen in answering the HOTs questions (questions 3 and 4). She also asked questions related to the topic. *"The pupil got excited about the lesson and took the initiative to act out the passage without being prompted"* (Observation notes, P3, IP) The special education teacher also confirmed that, *"...all I can say is, the children really enjoy it, this method of teaching"* (Teacher Interview 2, IP). In addition, Medina and Campano, (2006) stated, "through theatre the pupils find a safe space to fictionalize reality and enact more empowering individual and collective representations from which others might learn" (p. 333).

In Figure 7, Pupil 3 in answering Question 3 has *analysed* the information (HOTs) and *inferred* in her answer, '… *inside because it was raining'*. In Question 4, Pupil 3, shows *evaluation* (HOTs) of the situation that playing in the rain is unsafe and infers that this can cause one to fall sick.

Figure 7. Pupil 3's Intervention Phase Answers

Visualizing

Not all thinking is done in words. PWDys form visual images or pictures in their minds that are equally as meaningful, or more meaningful than words. Eide and Eide (2011) confirmed that dyslexic brains function differently and often have inherent advantages, "dyslexic brains store information like murals or stained glass, connect ideas like spider webs or hyperlinks, and move from one thought to another like ripples spreading over a pond" (p. 8). Pupil 8 demonstrated this.

During the baseline phase (Figure 8) Pupil 8 had difficulty with letter formation and his writing 'floated'. He used mostly the upper case for /P/, /A/, /D/ /S/ and /Y/ and mixed up his upper-case /L/ and lower-case /l/. He reversed his /g/ and /b/ with /d/. Pupil 8 gave single-word answers to comprehension questions. Questions 2 and 5 were the HOTs questions. The incorrect answer given in question 2 (like Pupil 3) indicates that Pupil 8 could not analyse the given information.

Figure 8. Pupil 8's Baseline Phase Answers

During the intervention phase (Figure 9), RAAC engaged Pupil 8 in repeatedly reading texts aloud, which improved his reading ability and improved decoding of words. He livened up and eagerly participated in the Theatre Art activities. He was particularly excited about listening and following the actions of the teacher (listening comprehension). *"He (the teacher) used actions and clues as prompts to his pupils and encouraged them to express their own feelings and experiences"* (Observation notes, P8, IP).

Stahl (2004) mentioned that teachers modelling with movements can become a useful tool for higher-level thinking. The special education teacher stated, *"No pictures are used…unless needed to clarify"* (Teacher Interview 1, IP). Nevertheless, Pupil 8 supplemented his reading or writing words by drawing his images and these images scaffolded him to visualize things better. In answer to question 3, Pupil 8 answered that there are five parts in an apple. Interestingly, Pupil 8 visualized and drew a sectioned-up apple (although not instructed to do so) to show the inside and tried to name the leaf, stem, skin, flesh and seed as given in the passage. This is an indication of *analysing* the structure of the apple (HOTs). Drawing gives PWDys the ability to frame their thoughts in an organized manner. Drawing gives them the freedom to imagine. Pupil 8 told the observer, *"I want to do more reading and answering questions. I love stories. I can imagine"* (Observation notes, P8, IP). Questions 4 and 5 were the HOTs questions. Pupil 8's answer to Question 4 did not show any HOTs. The answer to Question 5 shows a simple *inference* that eating apples is good.

Figure 9. Pupil 8's Intervention Phase Answers

Connecting

Theatre Art required PWDys to act out the activities that described the problem. The PWDys need to identify the relationship between two ideas presented in a text passage. This level of thinking helps PWDys gain even more understanding of the text passages and encourages them to elaborate their answers and explain their thoughts in more detail. Pupil 1 demonstrates this.

During the baseline phase (Figure 10), Pupil 1 gave single- or two-word answers to the questions. Questions 2 and 5 were the HOTs questions. The answer for question 2 (like Pupils 3 and 8) indicates that Pupil 1 could not understand and analyse the information provided.

Figure 10. Pupil 1's Baseline Phase Answers

The special education teacher in RAAC explained that he was going to read the passage three times slowly and instructed Pupil 1 to think about both the questions posed and his responses to them. The teacher then acted out the text-passage with movements facial expressions and prosody to explain the meaning of the text-passage. Pupil 1 became active in Theatre Art. He was attentive (listening comprehension) concentrated on the actions and used his visualization to understand the purpose of reading. The special education teacher provided feedback to Pupil 1 as to the content and explained concepts and processes. Pupil 1 modelled the special education teacher's actions and acted out the story based on his background knowledge and thinking of text content. *"He (Pupil 1) liked the movement and actions when reading the comprehension passage. He smiled and looked happy when the teacher used actions when explaining the comprehension he was reading"* (Observation notes, P1, IP).
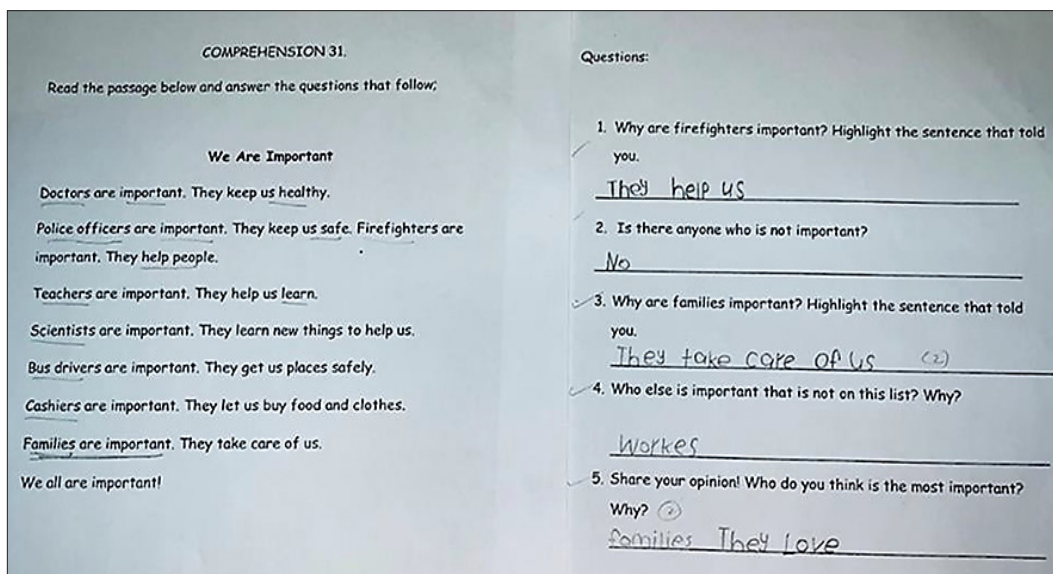

Figure 11. Pupil 1's Intervention Phase Answers

During the intervention phase, Pupil 1 started to explain some answers. His handwriting improved and he wrote longer sentences and gave logical answers to the questions asked. In Figure 11, in answer to Question 1, Pupil 1 paraphrased *'They help people'* to *'They help us'* , identifying himself with the people. In answer to Question 4, he wrote 'workes'. When asked, Pupil 1 enlightened the observer that he meant 'workers'. The word 'workers' was not in the text-passage (creating), thus exhibiting HOTs. Questions 4 and 5 were the HOTs questions. For Question 5 he modified *'They take care of us'* to *'They love'*. Pupil 1 could connect text-to-self when he *analysed* and related the story to incidents he experienced at home and made sense of his experiences. *"He (Pupil 1) loved the RAAC-Theatre Art reading sessions because he could relate the stories with himself".* (Teacher Interview 3, IP)

Limitations of the Study

Critical case samples were necessary for the involvement in the study. These pupils were identified as dyslexic by child psychologists.This means that it is difficult to generalize the results because each case is context-specific (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Nevertheless, the findings are applicable for assisting reading comprehension disorders which are present in several types of learning disabilities. Furthermore, the intervention blended two different strategy instructions of RAAC and Theatre Art so interpretation should be made with caution as this study was not designed to determine the

effects of separate components. The findings could not tell which component in the intervention package was responsible for HOTs in reading comprehension.

Creating Inclusive Learning Environments: Implications from the Dyslexia Example

Malaysia's target to place 75% of pupils with learning disabilities in mainstream schools by 2025 is drawing near. In inclusive classrooms, the pupils are diverse in their abilities and therefore the teaching-learning approaches must be well designed to create a conducive learning environment. One necessity for inclusive education to succeed is in the pedagogies planned which needs to be implemented in a creative differentiated manner.

Interventions for Reading Comprehension – What is the Significance?

Schools focus mainly on literacy skills, namely reading and writing, and leaving out HOTs, be it among pupils with or without learning disabilities. Furthermore, research on elevating HOTs among pupils with learning disabilities is rarely the focus. The RAAC- Theatre Art pedagogy in the present study is just one pedagogical approach which supports learning strategies (questioning, using prior knowledge, making inferences, visualising and connecting) that need to happen among all student for HOTs attainment in reading comprehension. Through these simple strategies will emerge more complex cognitive comprehension processes such as abstract thinking, metaphorical thinking and meaning, thus giving rise to HOTs.

Teacher Skills and Resources

To achieve HOTs in reading comprehension, the skills and awareness of teachers need to be upgraded. Annuar (2019) has pointed out that the skills of special education teachers need enhancement. Zalizan (2010) mentioned that the training of teachers in various pedagogies to prepare them with deep conceptual understandings of special inclusive education remains a challenge. The resources and facilities for teaching-learning need to be enriched and should focus on how HOTs can be improved in inclusive classrooms. Hasliza Yunus and Noor Aini Ahmad (2022) reported that teachers struggle and lack awareness of RCD in learning disabilities among children. According to the president of the PDM, "Malaysia is in dire need of a broader education system and more awareness programmes on children with dyslexia" (The Sun, 17 January 2023). Leaders of inclusive schools must also increase their knowledge and awareness to support the overall inclusive programme running in their schools

Embedding HOTs in Reading Comprehension Across Subjects

In an inclusive classroom, both the mainstream and pupils with learning disabilities intersect and meet to learn various subject matter together. The authors suggest inclusive classrooms place a focus on enhancing HOTs in reading comprehension in all subject matter. As reading comprehension is fundamental for all subjects, improvement in this skill can bring about better learning overall in various subjects. The teaching-learning materials for multiple teaching approaches to enhance HOTs in reading comprehension can also be created and made easily accessible for all inclusive schools. This is to ensure progress of basic linguistics skills together with HOTs as a foundation to underpin the process of learning for all. To provide easy access to all these materials, an online platform can be created where the three types of schools (special schools, integrated schools and inclusive mainstream schools) can attain these resources effectively.

Conclusion

The implementation of the special education policy in Malaysia is 'top down'. This gives rise to a gap between the actual end outcome of the policy envisioned by the Ministry of Education and the ability of the implementers on the ground (Nazmin Abdullah, 2023). This type of implementation also affects factors such as the preparation of teachers and facilities specifically needed for inclusive classrooms. It is insufficient alone that the target of 75% is met statistically, the quality of teaching-learning in inclusive classrooms must also reflect deep conceptual insight and practice to attain the target of the MEB.

The learning and teaching of HOTs in reading comprehension is a multi-faceted process that consists of decoding the meaning, listening and interacting with the text. Reading comprehension is an essential skill for all subjects. The researchers suggest that HOTs in reading comprehension are made the central foundational pedagogical focus in inclusive classrooms for all subjects. The Ministry of Education can restructure and revise the training of special education teachers to uplift knowledge and enhance awareness of the latest pedagogies. Collaborative international partnerships can also be initiated to elevate SEN teacher training and resources for reading comprehension. Nonetheless, implementing this will not be an easy task as it needs multi-stakeholder participation, planning and collaboration.

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Appendix A. Reread-Adapt and Answer-Comprehend (RAAC) Intervention Sequence

Step	Description
Step 1 **Prompt Student**	"Read this story the best you can and as quickly as you can. Pay attention to what you are reading, as you will need to answer a few questions."
Step 2 **Read Prompts**	Ask student to read question-generation prompts ("who, what, where, when, how" questions.
Step3 **Reread**	Ask student to reread passage aloud until reaching goal between 2 to 4 times
Step 4 **Correct Errors**	• If student pauses during reading, say the correct word and have student repeat. • Correct all other errors after passage read and ask student to repeat them
Step 5 **Praise**	Provide feedback to student on improvements in speed and accuracy.
Step 6 **Adapt & Answer**	Ask student to adapt and answer questions placed on cue cards. Error correction process: a. First try: If no answer or incorrect answer, prompt student to "See if you can find the answer in the passage." b. Second try: If no or incorrect answer, prompt and point to sentence(s) in the passage "See if you can find the answer in this sentence." c. Third try: If no or incorrect answer, provide answer and point to where you found the answer
Step 7 **End & Adjust**	When session ends, adjust the difficulty of the reading material for next time. • Lower the reading material by one grade level, if fluency goal not reached after three sessions in a row, • Raise the reading material by one grade level, if fluency goal reached in three sessions in a row.

Source: Modified from Therrien et al., (2006), p. 25

Appendix B. Procedure for the RAAC-Theatre Art Intervention Phase

No.	Step	Description
1	Prompting	A cue card with questions is given to the PWDy who is asked to read and once completed the card is then taken away.
2	Reading for the first time	A passage is then given to the PWDy. The teacher instructs the pupil to read the text and to pay attention to the text, as the questions in the cue card must be answered. The instruction is like the Baseline Phase. The PWDy reads the text aloud, and if the PWDy does not say the initial word within 3 seconds, the teacher says the word. Furthermore, if the PWDy hesitates for 3 seconds on any word, the teacher says the word. A second cue card for vocabulary is then given to the PWDy and the teacher explains the meaning of each word.
3	Reading for the second time	The PWD reads the passage the second time following the steps as stated in 2.
4	Reading for the third time	The PWD reads the passage the third time following the steps as stated in 2.
5	Adapt & Answer	The cue card with the questions is given to the PWDy again. The PWDy must read and answer the questions. i) If no answer or incorrect answer the 1st time: The teacher prompts the PWDy to look for information in the passage. *'See if you can find the answer in the. . .'* ii) If no answer or incorrect answer the 2nd time: The prompt is given again. iii) If no answer or incorrect answer the 3rd time: The teacher provides the answer and points to where it can be found. The passage and the cue card are taken away.
6	Passage Retell	The PWDy is instructed to try and remember and retell the passage just read. The teacher acts out the story in the passage. The PWDy is asked to imitate the teacher's actions, act out the passage, and asked to retell the passage (embedded Theatre Art intervention).
7	Ask comprehension questions and record answers.	The teacher reads and asks comprehension questions. The PWDy writes down the answers. If the PWDy does not say anything or gets off track for 5 seconds, it is marked as an error, and the next question is put forward. If the PWDy asks the teacher to repeat the question, the teacher can repeat the question once. If the PWDy asks the teacher to spell out words or give a verbal explanation to the answer, the teacher can record down the verbal answer.
8	Scoring for correct reading comprehension score (RCS)	Five questions are put forward. Three are literal questions – remembering and understanding (lower order thinking skills) and two - explaining and analyzing (higher order thinking skills). The PWDy writes the answers. Oral answers which are received unassisted within five seconds are considered for scoring. Rubrics are used for evaluation and the performance is recorded in forms (Rasinski et al., 2005). All literal questions answered correctly are scored one point each and higher order thinking skills questions answered correctly are scored two points each, making a total of seven points for the five questions.

Source: Prepared by authors

BOOK REVIEW

Learning in the Anthropocene: Reimagining Education in the Twenty-First Century. By Carl A. Maida (2023), 370 pages. ISBN: 978-1-66692-468-8. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Learning in the Anthropocene: Reimagining Education in the 21st Century is an important body of work that addresses how education should be envisioned in an age of acceleration punctuated with crisis, transition, and fluidity. In the face of the Anthropocene, Carl A. Maida's book explores two pertinent questions- how can education prepare young people for the uncertain future? And how can project-based learning deployed as a pedagogy serve to enlighten the minds of young people?

To answer these questions, Maida provides a historically rich and anthropologically engaging scholarship that masterfully connects the dots between two key important arenas required to reimagine education in the 21st century – school and society. Before delving into the contents of the book, it is first important to revisit the term Anthropocene which has received greater visibility in academic research in contemporary times. In essence, the Anthropocene was first proposed by Crutzen and Stoermer as the new geological epoch in the present time to characterize the negative consequences of human-induced actions on the natural environment. However, in March 2024, a panel of geologists from the International Union of Geological Science (IUGS), an authoritative body in the field of geology, declared that the Anthropocene is not an official geological epoch, but rather a pivotal chapter in human civilization. Regardless of viewing it as a new epoch or a major event in human history, the Anthropocene is still a powerful way to understand the world, which is now rampant with global diseases, environmental degradation, unethical technological advancements, and collapsing societies. Owing to this, education plays a critical role in preparing young people to face these unfolding futures underpinned by crisis and conflicts – and this is what the author addresses as the book explores experiential instructional approaches that enable students to gain the freedom to produce knowledge for the future. As a teacher and educational researcher in Malaysia, this book speaks to me in great volumes on how project-based learning, when planned well, connected to a broader context, and deployed efficiently, can deeply shift young minds to be critical thinkers.

The book is organized around three themes – Millennial Adolescence, Changing The Subject, and Rationality and Redemption which provide a closer inspection of how societal and cultural influences shape the youth. In the first theme, Millennial Adolescence, the author establishes that the adolescent has personal agency that unravels through a reciprocal relationship between their social environments. In highly regulated education systems that are bounded by accountability regimes, teachers and educators often overlook this 'emerging sense of self' of the youth, and as a teacher myself, this part is a reflection in today's context whereby students are often graded through a set of checklists – erasing their own personal identities. In Chapter 3, Maida (2023) likens education as a social movement as both "develop worldviews that restructure cognition, that re-cognize reality itself" (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991, p. 65, as cited in Maida, 2023). By associating education and social movements, Maida makes an important claim for all educators to take heed – just as how social movements occur within a specific historical point and are influenced by broader events, the same applies to education. This is a great segue for the next section – Changing The Subject whereby Maida illustrates successful and localised project-based learning activities taking shape in communities through Chapters 5, 6 and 7 prior to establishing project-based learning as a critical pedagogy in the age of Anthropocene in Chapter 4. In this section, Maida begins by challenging the current outdated realities of teaching and learning by drawing on Seymour Sarason's 'regularities of schooling' in Chapter 4. The argument is centred on how "persistent set of practices and structures

that dominate schooling ... are ineffective for motivating and encouraging the kind thinking required in the 21ˢᵗ century" (Maida, 2023, p. 73). The author further strengthens that project-based learning as an experiential approach fosters critical modes of inquiry that provide a deeper appreciation of the outcomes of learning for both the students and parents. I was also particularly intrigued by this chapter on Maida's (2023) argument on how digital instruction, similar to Fordist innovations a century ago, merely "mass produce ideas, separating individuals from social and emotional processes necessary for deeper learning" (p. 83). Maida further elucidates that "digital learning more often depends upon designs that serve managerial and administrative ends, further alienating and segmenting student populations" (p. 83). While in recent years digital education has morphed into a global agenda and taken as a top priority among international organizations and nation-states, Maida's arguments should serve as a reminder for us to pause and reflect on how digital education might negatively orchestrate teaching and learning.

Moving forward, in the third theme, Maida (2023) illustrates three key moments – the Machine Age, the Postwar, and the Millennium, that have resulted in prominent changes in learning and human development. Employing a historical analysis to gain a deeper insight into the three different historical eras, Maida tacitly weaves the need for critical pedagogies to support reflective inquiry and democratic schooling amid unprecedented global change. I personally enjoyed these three chapters as Maida depicts how the emergence of social movements during each period led to structural changes, which simultaneously promote learning through participation and inform public pedagogies. Maida's work here reminds us to rethink education in the 21st century as the convergence around the idea that technology will save us from all our problems has subsequently led to the erosion of democracy in education.

In conclusion, this book is a deeply reflective work which brings together two important arenas in education – the society and school. The way Maida extends his work by drawing onto historical analysis not only enriches his analysis but also grounds his arguments in a well-established intellectual tradition, thereby deepening the theoretical rigor and historical context of the scholarship. Similarly, reflecting on my role as a teacher in advancing education for sustainable development, this scholarship shows the power of project-based learning as evidenced in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 to illuminate the minds of the youths. I envision *Learning in the Anthropocene* will be a foundational text in the field of comparative education and education policy in the coming years as it showcases that only through situating knowledge within local contexts, we can enlighten youths to navigate the uncertain terrains of the Anthropocene.

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