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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BALANCING FUN AND EXAM READINESS: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON TECHNOLOGY AND INTERACTIVE APPROACHES IN MALAYSIAN PRIMARY ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored how Malaysian primary school English teachers integrate technology to balance engaging, student-centered learning with exam readiness. The study involved six purposively selected English teachers from primary schools in Kinta Utara District, Perak. The purpose was to investigate strategies, challenges, and perceptions related to technology-enhanced teaching in preparing students for examinations while maintaining motivation and interest in learning English.Data were collected through semi structured interview s and analysed thematically, resulting in six key themes: Balance of Fun and Exam Readiness, Customization vs. Templates, Infrastructure and Resource Needs,Pedagogical Strategies,Professional Development, and Technology Integration. Findings revealed that teachers used interactive platforms, gamified quizzes, group projects, and multimedia presentations to foster active learning and exam readiness. Challenges included limited access to devices, inconsistent internet connectivity, and varying levels of teacher technological competence. Teachers emphasized the need for continuous professional development and better infrastructure to maximize technology's potential. In conclusion, integrating technology effectively, supported by sufficient resources and targeted training, can create dynamic and inclusive learning environments that both enhance student engagement and ensure exam preparedness. This balanced approach supports curriculum objectives while nurturing students' confidence and sustained interest in learning English.

Introduction:-

Technology integration in Malaysian classrooms has significantly transformed teaching approaches and student engagement. Teachers increasingly adopt learner-centered methods, incorporating multimedia resources and online platforms to make lessons interactive and stimulating,enhancing participation, peer collaboration, and motivation (Nambiar et al., 2017; Ahmad et al., 2025). Platforms like Classkick offer real-time feedback that fosters learner autonomy, confidence, and cooperative learning (Wali &Abumejdad, 2025).

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Nevertheless, technology must be carefully balanced with exam readiness, particularly in primary English contexts where national assessments remain pivotal. The flipped classroom model has demonstrated moderate improvements in core language skills but has not fundamentally altered preferred learning approaches (Parati et al., 2023). Teachers' technological knowledge combined with strong pedagogical competence enables more inventive and effective instruction (Ahmad Kusaini et al., 2023), with leadership and infrastructure playing crucial supporting roles (Lo & Alias, 2024).

Another persistent challenge is students' varied readiness for mobile-assisted learning;manyshow optimism but also discomfort or insecurity (Shuib et al., 2018; Chun, 2023). Still, mobile learning and ICT have enhanced writing skills, language proficiency, and engagement when implemented effectively (John & Md Yunus, 2019; Malik, 2023). Best practices involve deploying smart toolssuch as interactive whiteboards, adaptive platforms, and gamified learningsupported by technology leadership and TPACK-informed professional development (Yadav, 2023; Devaraj et al., 2025; Lo & Alias, 2024).

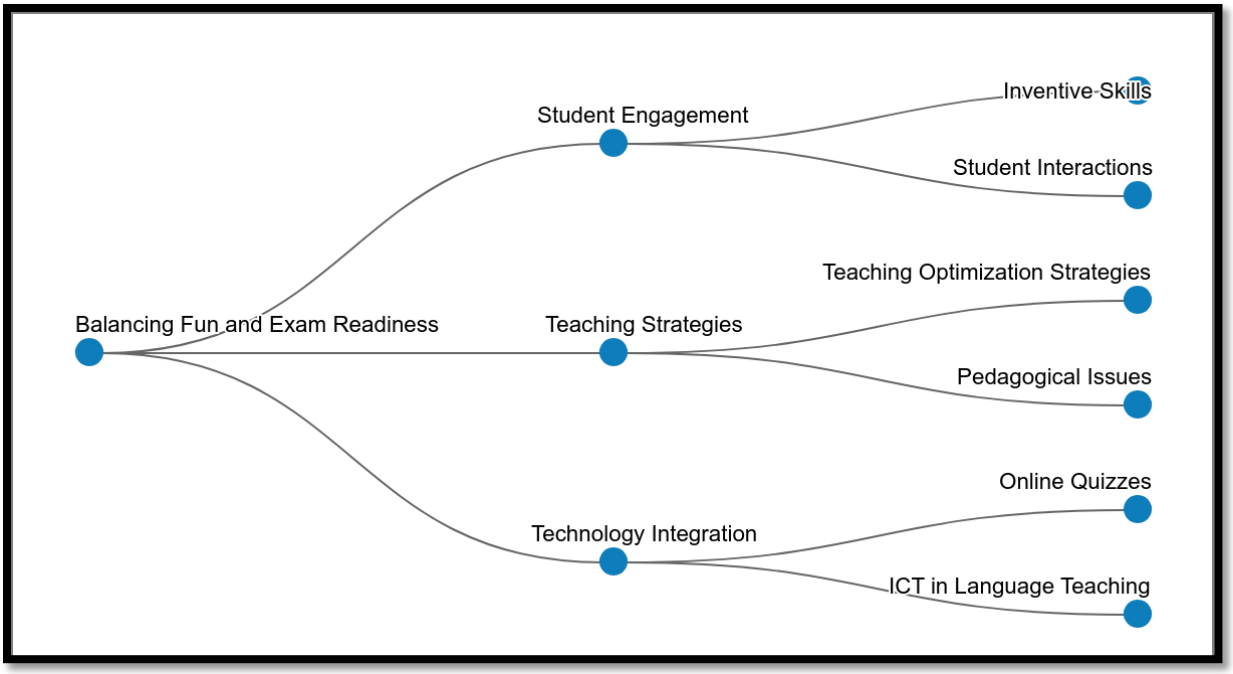
Empirical studies from Malaysia confirm positive outcomes: research in Kedah found that over 90% of teachers are integrating digital technology effectively, though certain groupslike special educatorsmay require additional support (Ahmad et al., 2025). Qualitative studies in rural contexts reveal nuanced teacher attitudes, highlighting both willingness to innovate and challenges tied to infrastructure and confidence (Zawawi, 2024; Pragasam, 2023).
Exploring how to harness technology to create learning environments that are both motivating and academically rigorous is crucial in light of these developments. This study centers on teachers' perspectives in Malaysian primary English classrooms, aiming to understand how fun, engagement, and exam readiness can coexist through effective technology integration.

Problem Statement:
In Malaysian primary English classrooms, integrating technology has become a central strategy for enhancing student engagement and participation. While digital tools such as interactive whiteboards, gamification platforms, and mobile learning applications have demonstrated positive impacts on motivation, collaboration, and language proficiency, the challenge remains in ensuring that these engaging approaches do not compromise exam preparedness. National assessments continue to play a critical role in determining student achievement and school performance, making it essential for teachers to strike a balance between enjoyable, technology-rich learning activities and structured, exam-focused instruction.

Existing studies have highlighted that teachers often struggle with balancing fun and exam readiness due to factors such as limited pedagogical skills in technology integration, inadequate infrastructure, and varying student readiness levels. Additionally, some teachers express uncertainty in selecting the most suitable digital tools and aligning them with curriculum requirements. Despite the availability of professional development opportunities, many educators still require targeted guidance on how to strategically integrate technology in ways that complement traditional methods without diminishing exam preparation. This gap in understanding and practice underscores the need for an in-depth qualitative exploration of how teachers navigate these competing priorities in their classrooms.

Research Objective:
This study aims to explore the perspectives and strategies of Malaysian primary English teachers in integrating technology to create a balance between engaging, fun learning experiences and exam readiness.

Conceptual Framework:
Figure 1: Balancing Fun and exam Readiness



The Figure 1 above, balancing fun and exam readiness in Malaysian primary English classrooms requires a multi-dimensional approach that addresses student engagement, teaching strategies, and technology integration. Student engagement is a key determinant of successful learning outcomes, as active participation fosters both motivation and language retention. Interactive and collaborative activities, supported by technology, enhance learners' curiosity while aligning with exam-oriented goals. For example, platforms such as Classkick provide real-time feedback, facilitate cooperative learning, and strengthen social interaction skills (Wali & Abumejdad, 2025). Engagement is also closely tied to the development of inventive skills, as students exposed to creative, problem-solving tasks in technology-rich environments demonstrate higher levels of motivation and deeper cognitive processing (Ahmad Kusaini et al., 2023).

Effective teaching strategies are essential for maintaining this balance, with optimization techniques such as flipped classrooms, blended learning, and adaptive instruction allowing educators to combine interactive learning with syllabus coverage. A recent Malaysian study found that the flipped classroom approach produced moderate improvements in students' core English skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing without compromising their preparedness for examinations (Parati et al., 2023). However, pedagogical issues remain a challenge, particularly when teachers lack sufficient training in aligning playful learning experiences with curriculum demands. Professional development programs that integrate pedagogy with technology have been shown to improve teachers' competence and confidence in delivering engaging, exam-relevant lessons (Alghasab & Handley, 2025).

Technology integration plays a pivotal role in bridging engaging instruction with academic rigor. Digital formative assessments, such as Kahoot! and Quizizz, are examples of online quizzes that motivate learners while enabling teachers to monitor progress and address learning gaps in real time (Chavez, 2025). Additionally, the use of ICT in language teaching, such as multimedia presentations, interactive grammar applications, and CEFR-aligned learning platforms, has been found to enhance language acquisition, retention, and exam readiness (Nambiar et al., 2017; Ghavifekr et al., 2017). When strategically implemented, technology not only sustains student interest but also supports measurable academic gains, ensuring that the pursuit of enjoyment in learning does not detract from exam performance.

Methodology:-

Research Design:

This study adopted a qualitative approach that allowed for an in-depth understanding of primary English teachers' experiences in balancing engaging pedagogies with exam readiness, as well as their perspectives on technology integration.

Population and Sampling:
The population comprised 436 English-optionist primary school teachers in Kinta Utara, Perak. Using purposive sampling, six teachers representing diverse teaching experiences, school types, and ICT resource contexts were selected. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (i) currently teach English at the primary level, (ii) have at least more than five years of teaching experience, (iii) be actively involved in lesson planning and delivery, and (iv) be a master trainer, head teacher, or SISC+. Teachers not meeting these criteria or unwilling to participate were excluded.

Participant Selection Criteria and Demographics
Participants were purposively selected to capture diverse perspectives that could strengthen the credibility and transferability of the findings. Inclusion criteria required participants to (i) currently teach English at the primary level, (ii) have more than five years of teaching experience, (iii) be actively involved in lesson planning and delivery, and (iv) hold a leadership or mentoring role such as master trainer, head of English panel, or SISC+. This ensured that participants possessed both classroom-level insights and broader pedagogical knowledge.The final sample comprised six teachers (P1–P6) from primary schools in Kinta Utara, Perak. They represented a gender-balanced mix (three male, three female) and brought between 5 to 20 years of teaching experience. Participants also reflected varied school settings, including urban and rural schools, which allowed the study to capture contextual differences in access to infrastructure and digital tools. This range of teaching backgrounds and contexts enhanced the transferability of the findings by illustrating how technology integration is navigated across diverse primary English classrooms.

Data Collection:
Data were gathered through semi-structured telephone interviews lasting 15-20 minutes. The interview guide, validated by a TESL lecturer and a qualitative research expert, covered six areas: balancing fun with exam readiness, lesson customization, infrastructure and resources, pedagogical strategies, professional development, and technology integration. Open-ended questions encouraged detailed responses, with prompts used for clarification. All interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

Data Analysis and Thematic Development:
Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the interview data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps: (1) familiarization, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Related codes were grouped into categories and refined into six final themes: Balance of Fun and Exam Readiness, Customization vs. Templates, Infrastructure and Resource Needs, Pedagogical Strategies, Professional Development, and Technology Integration. The coding process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis. After transcription, initial codes were generated manually and grouped into categories that reflected recurring ideas. These codes were then refined into six final themes aligned with the study's objectives. To enhance trustworthiness, two strategies were applied: (i) peer debriefing and expert validation, where a qualitative research expert reviewed the coding framework to confirm consistency, and (ii) member checking, where selected participants were invited to verify the accuracy of their transcribed responses and the interpretation of key themes. These measures strengthened credibility and minimized researcher bias, ensuring the findings authentically represented teachers' perspectives.

Ethical Considerations:
This study was conducted in accordance with institutional research ethics guidelines. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. The purpose, scope, and confidentiality measures were explained, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms (P1–P6) were used, and any identifying details were removed from transcripts. Data were stored securely on a password-protected device, and access was restricted to the researcher only. Audio recordings were deleted after transcription and verification.

Table 1: Findings

Participant / themes	Balance of Fun and Exam Readiness	Customization vs. Templates	Infrastructure and Resource Needs	Pedagogical Strategies	Professional Development	Technology Integration
P1	They will learn to grasp the ideas better… help them to also be ready for the exams.	x = not mentioned by participant	It will be nice if we have a smart board… if the students were to have tabs.	I will always vouch for project-based learning…	A lot of webinars … I don't have time… if the schools were to send us for a physical course…	I do use the basic ones such as word wall, ED puzzle, life worksheet… incorporate Delima.
P2	x = not mentioned by participant	Teachers want samples but I prefers not to block creativity.	Need smartphones, tablets, internet connection.	Use games like quizzes, content creation (TikTok, Telegram).	x = not mentioned by participant	x = not mentioned by participant
P3	Self-reflection via standard forms noting lesson issues.	Customized plan suits class better than one-size template.	Need laptop, good internet… smart TV in each class.	Games like crossword, maze, Kahoot, small groups help learning.	Learn from social media, but workshops from experts help.	Bring to computer lab… online games… smart TV shows QR codes.
P4	x = not mentioned by participant	x = not mentioned by participant	Smartboard … good internet… teachers use own gadgets, own line.	x = not mentioned by participant	Guides not helpful… workshops hands-on help	Fortunately, all the time… make life easier in classroom.
P5	I guess so… framework helps to balance fun and exam readiness.	x = not mentioned by participant	Smartboard is good… if we can have more like tabs or laptops…	I will ask them to sit in groups… they interact more… animations.	Like using AI or the latest technologies… workshops.	I will ask them to prepare assignments or projects… they use Canva and quizzes.
P6	Learn grammar and vocabulary through model, use in exams.	x = not mentioned by participant	Apps or some program… smart board.	Games… quizzes… animations related to vocab.	Guides preferred.	I use smart board, LCD and computer laptop… vocabulary games.

Discussion:-

This study examined Malaysian primary English teachers' perspectives on balancing engaging, technology-enhanced lessons with exam readiness. The findings presented in Table 1 summarize the raw perspectives of the six participants. In this section, these results are interpreted and situated within the broader literature to highlight their significance. Balance of Fun and Exam Readiness, customization vs. Templates, Infrastructure and Resource Needs, Pedagogical Strategies, Professional Development, and Technology Integration. These results align with and expand upon existing literature on technology integration in English language teaching. This aligns with previous research (see Section 1).

Balance of Fun and Exam Readiness:

Teachers recognized the importance of combining enjoyable learning activities with exam-focused preparation. For example, participants (P1, P5, and P6) stressed that project-based activities, games, and vocabulary modeling not only maintained student interest but also supported assessment performance. This finding echoes Parati et al. (2023), who found that the flipped classroom model improved English skills without compromising exam readiness. Similarly, Yadav (2023) highlighted that gamified tools can bridge enjoyment and academic achievement, a balance that is crucial in exam-oriented educational contexts.

The emphasis on maintaining student engagement while preparing them for assessments also supports the argument of Ahmad Kusaini et al. (2023) that inventive teaching strategies foster both motivation and cognitive development, which are essential for success in high-stakes assessments.

Customisation vs. Templates:

Several participants (P2, P3) expressed a preference for customized lesson plans over generic templates, citing flexibility and better alignment with class needs. This is consistent with Maasum et al. (2012), who argued that differentiated instruction tailored to students' readiness and abilities is more effective in diverse classrooms. Teachers' reluctance to rely on rigid templates also reflects the importance of teacher autonomy in adapting content for maximum engagement (Lo & Alias, 2024). This finding suggests a tension between efficiency and responsiveness: while templates provide uniformity and save preparation time, customization enables teachers to respond to students' immediate needs and contextual realities. Such flexibility is particularly valuable in diverse classrooms where learners' language proficiency and learning preferences vary widely.

Infrastructure and Resource Needs:

Access to adequate infrastructure, such as smartboards, tablets, laptops, and stable internet connectivity, was a recurring concern among participants (P1–P6). These needs mirror the findings of Devaraj et al. (2025) and Ahmad et al. (2025), who reported that the availability of technological resources significantly affects the quality of technology-enhanced teaching. Inadequate infrastructure has been identified as a major barrier to effective ICT integration in Malaysian classrooms (Lo & Alias, 2024), limiting teachers' ability to implement interactive, student-centered approaches.

Pedagogical Strategies:

Teachers reported using diverse strategies such as group work, animations, crosswords, quizzes, and project-based learning to foster interaction and active participation (P1, P3, P5, P6). These strategies align with Nambiar et al. (2017) and Wali and Abumejdad (2025), who emphasized that interactive activities and real-time feedback tools promote engagement and collaborative learning. Moreover, the integration of collaborative tasks with exam-oriented content supports the principles of the TPACK framework, where pedagogy and technology are harmonized for meaningful learning (Ahmad Kusaini et al., 2023).

Professional Development:

Professional development emerged as both a need and a challenge. While some participants valued workshops, others noted a preference for face-to-face, hands-on sessions over webinars (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6). This preference for practical training is consistent with Chun (2023), who found that teacher confidence in technology integration increases when professional development is interactive and directly applicable. Furthermore, targeted training aligned with the CEFR and curriculum goals is essential for sustaining teacher engagement and competence (Alghasab & Handley, 2025).

Technology Integration:
Participants demonstrated a range of technology uses, from interactive platforms like Wordwall, Quizizz, and Canva to the use of smartboards and computer labs (P1, P3, P5, P6). These practices reflect previous findings that digital formative assessment tools can enhance learning outcomes and motivation (Chavez, 2025; Yadav, 2023). However, as highlighted by Pragasam and Sulaiman (2023), integration must be purposeful and aligned with pedagogical goals to be effective. The findings here reinforce the need for sustained resource support and pedagogical training to ensure that technology serves as a bridge rather than a barrier to academic achievement.

Implications:
The results indicate that achieving a balance between fun and exam readiness in Malaysian primary English classrooms requires not only creative pedagogy but also strong infrastructure and ongoing teacher training. Aligning with previous research (Lo & Alias, 2024; Ahmad et al., 2025), the study underscores that technology integration is most effective when teachers have both the tools and the professional competence to adapt lessons creatively. This balance is essential for fostering a positive learning environment that is both engaging and academically rigorous. However, it is important to note that the findings are based on the perspectives of only six purposively selected teachers. As such, the results are context-specific and cannot be generalized to all Malaysian primary English teachers. This limitation should be addressed in future studies with larger and more diverse samples.

Conclusion:-

This study explored Malaysian primary English teachers' perspectives on integrating technology to balance engaging, student-centered learning with exam readiness. The findings revealed that teachers valued interactive strategies, such as games, project-based tasks, and multimedia tools, for fostering motivation and participation while maintaining alignment with assessment requirements. Customization of lesson content, rather than reliance on standard templates, emerged as a preferred approach to meet diverse learner needs. However, the effective implementation of these practices depends on adequate infrastructure, access to resources, and sustained professional development.

The study reinforces that technology integration in primary English classrooms is most successful when supported by strong pedagogical planning, relevant training, and reliable resources. A balanced approach combining enjoyment with academic rigor can enhance both student engagement and examination performance. Moving forward, stakeholders should prioritize equipping schools with necessary technological tools and providing practical, hands-on training opportunities that empower teachers to innovate confidently in their classrooms.

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