

Malay as a Mediational Resource in English-Mediated Peer Interaction Among Low-Proficiency Malaysian Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

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The role of learners' first language (L1) in second-language (L2) learning remains contested, particularly where English-only pedagogies dominate classroom practice. This study aimed to examine how Malay functions as a mediational resource during English-mediated, task-based peer discussions among undergraduates with low English proficiency. Guided by Sociocultural Theory and translanguaging perspectives, the qualitative case study involved six Malay-speaking female undergraduates enrolled in a Malaysian university English course. Data comprised video-recorded peer discussions and stimulated-recall interviews. Naturally occurring discourse was examined through interactional analysis, while participants' reflections were analysed thematically. Malay served interrelated cognitive, social, and affective functions. Participants used it strategically for vocabulary retrieval, conceptual clarification, idea generation, negotiation of meaning, task management, and collaborative problem-solving. It also reduced anxiety, protected face, strengthened group cohesion, and encouraged participation. Rather than replacing English, Malay helped participants sustain engagement and move towards English production. The findings challenge deficit-oriented interpretations of L1 use and demonstrate that Malay can provide purposeful sociocultural scaffolding during peer interaction. The study supports context-sensitive multilingual pedagogy that recognises learners' full linguistic repertoires while maintaining English as the principal learning target.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to existing literature by providing interaction-based evidence that Malay functions as a cognitive, social, and affective mediational tool in English-mediated peer discussions among low-proficiency Malaysian undergraduates. By combining naturally occurring interaction with

stimulated recall, it demonstrates how L1 use sustains participation while supporting movement towards English production.

1. Introduction

The role of learners' first language (L1) in second language (L2) learning has long been one of the most contested issues in language education. For decades, English language teaching has been influenced by monolingual assumptions that position maximum exposure to the target language as the optimal condition for acquisition (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2009). Within this paradigm, learners' use of their L1 is frequently interpreted as evidence of limited proficiency, insufficient effort, or resistance to target-language learning. Consequently, English-only pedagogies continue to shape classroom practices in many educational settings, including those characterised by widespread multilingualism.

In recent years, however, growing bodies of research in Sociocultural Theory (SCT), translanguaging, and multilingual education have challenged these assumptions. Rather than viewing languages as separate and competing systems, contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises bilingual and multilingual learners as drawing flexibly upon integrated linguistic repertoires to support learning, participation, and meaning-making (García & Li Wei, 2014; Cummins, 2021; Wei, 2018). From this perspective, learners' L1 is not a barrier to L2 development but a potentially valuable mediational resource that enables them to regulate cognition, negotiate understanding, manage social relationships, and participate more effectively in learning activities.

These debates are particularly relevant in multilingual societies such as Malaysia. English occupies a powerful position as a language of academic mobility, professional advancement, and global communication, while Malay functions as the national language and the primary medium of everyday interaction for the majority of students. Recent educational reforms, including the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), have intensified institutional emphasis on English proficiency. At the same time, classroom interaction frequently reveals multilingual practices that challenge English-only expectations. During collaborative tasks, students often move between Malay and English as they negotiate meaning, coordinate group activity, and manage communicative difficulties.

For low-proficiency learners, these multilingual practices may be especially significant. Students with limited English proficiency frequently experience difficulty sustaining interaction exclusively in English, particularly when tasks involve abstract reasoning, collaborative problem-solving, or spontaneous oral production. Such learners often face heightened cognitive demands, increased communicative anxiety, and concerns about negative evaluation by peers. Under these conditions, Malay may function as a strategic resource that enables learners to remain engaged in English-mediated tasks rather than withdraw from participation altogether.

Despite increasing scholarly interest in translanguaging and multilingual pedagogy, important gaps remain in the literature. First, much existing research on L1 use in Malaysia has relied heavily on surveys, questionnaires, and attitudinal data, providing limited insight into how language choices emerge during naturally occurring classroom interaction. Second, low-proficiency learners remain underrepresented in discourse-

based investigations of multilingual practices. Third, research has tended to prioritise cognitive outcomes such as comprehension and task completion while paying comparatively less attention to affective and relational dimensions of language use, including anxiety management, confidence building, face protection, and peer solidarity. To address these gaps, the present study examines the role of Malay as a mediational resource during English-mediated peer-group discussions among low-proficiency undergraduates in a Malaysian university. Grounded in Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) and informed by translanguaging perspectives (García & Li Wei, 2014; Wei, 2018), the study conceptualises language use as socially situated action rather than linguistic deficiency. Specifically, it investigates learners' motivations for using Malay, the cognitive and social functions Malay serves during collaborative tasks, and the ways in which Malay shapes participation, emotional engagement, and group dynamics.

Methodologically, the study combines interactional analysis of naturally occurring peer discussions with stimulated recall interviews. This dual approach enables examination not only of what learners do during interaction but also how they interpret and explain their language choices. By integrating observable interactional evidence with participant reflections, the study provides a richer understanding of multilingual practices than is possible through perception-based research alone.

The study contributes to educational linguistics in several ways. Theoretically, it extends sociocultural understandings of mediation by demonstrating how peer interaction among low-proficiency learners creates opportunities for collaborative scaffolding and meaning-making. Methodologically, it contributes interaction-based evidence to a field that has often relied on attitudinal data. Pedagogically, it challenges rigid English-only assumptions and supports more context-sensitive approaches to multilingual learning in higher education. More broadly, the study argues that understanding how learners use their full linguistic repertoires is essential for developing equitable and effective language education in multilingual societies.

1.1. Reconsidering English-Only Ideologies in L2 Education

For much of the twentieth century, language teaching was dominated by monolingual assumptions that positioned exclusive use of the target language as the most effective pathway to second language acquisition. English-only approaches emerged from the belief that maximum exposure to the target language would accelerate learning by reducing dependence on learners' first language (Cook, 2001; Macaro, 2009). Within this paradigm, the use of the L1 was often viewed as interference, a sign of insufficient proficiency, or evidence of learner dependence.

However, these assumptions have increasingly been challenged by contemporary multilingual scholarship. Researchers have argued that monolingual models fail to reflect the linguistic realities of multilingual societies and classrooms, where learners routinely draw upon multiple linguistic resources to support communication and learning (Cummins, 2021; García & Li Wei, 2014). Rather than functioning as an obstacle, the first language can serve as a resource that enables learners to process information, negotiate meaning, and participate more effectively in classroom interaction.

The tension between English-only ideology and multilingual classroom practice is particularly evident in Malaysia. English remains strongly associated with academic success, professional mobility, and international competitiveness. Consequently, many educational institutions continue to promote English-dominant learning environments. Yet empirical observations consistently reveal that students move fluidly between Malay and English during collaborative tasks, suggesting a disconnect between institutional expectations and actual language practices. Understanding this tension requires moving beyond normative questions about whether learners should use their L1 and instead examining how L1 use functions within specific learning contexts.

1.2. Sociocultural Theory and Language as Mediation

The present study is grounded in Sociocultural Theory (SCT), which conceptualises learning as a socially mediated process that emerges through interaction with others and engagement with cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978). From this perspective, language is not merely an object of learning but a mediational means through which cognitive development occurs. Learning is therefore understood as a fundamentally social activity in which individuals construct understanding through participation in collaborative practices.

A central concept within SCT is mediation. Human cognition does not develop in isolation but is shaped by symbolic and material tools that enable individuals to regulate thought and action. Language represents one of the most powerful mediational tools available to learners because it enables them to organise thinking, solve problems, and coordinate social interaction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Within multilingual settings, learners may draw upon their first language to mediate understanding when target-language resources are insufficient for immediate communicative needs.

Another key concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as the distance between what learners can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with assistance. Although traditionally associated with teacher support, the ZPD can also emerge through peer interaction. Learners working collaboratively may scaffold one another's understanding by providing explanations, clarification, prompts, and feedback. Such collaborative activity creates opportunities for development that would be difficult to achieve individually.

Closely related to the ZPD is the notion of scaffolding. Scaffolding refers to temporary support that enables learners to perform beyond their current level of competence. Within peer interaction, scaffolding often occurs through collaborative dialogue, where learners jointly solve problems, negotiate meaning, and co-construct understanding. Importantly, scaffolding need not be provided exclusively through the target language. Learners may utilise their L1 strategically to clarify concepts, retrieve vocabulary, and coordinate participation before returning to English-mediated activity.

SCT also emphasises the process of internalisation, whereby socially mediated activity gradually becomes individual competence. From this perspective, temporary reliance on Malay should not be interpreted as evidence of failure to use English. Rather, it may represent an important developmental mechanism through which learners organise understanding and prepare for subsequent L2 production.

1.3. Collaborative Dialogue and Peer Mediation

Collaborative dialogue occupies a central position within sociocultural approaches to language learning. Swain (2000) argues that language development occurs when learners engage in dialogue that requires them to reflect upon language, negotiate meaning, and solve communicative problems together. Such dialogue provides opportunities for learners to externalise thinking processes and jointly construct knowledge.

Research on peer interaction demonstrates that collaborative learning environments frequently generate forms of collective scaffolding in which learners support one another's development (Donato, 1994). Rather than functioning as isolated individuals, learners contribute distributed expertise to accomplish shared goals. Through questioning, repetition, reformulation, and explanation, peers help one another overcome linguistic and conceptual challenges.

For low-proficiency learners, collaborative dialogue may be particularly important. These learners often face difficulties sustaining interaction exclusively in the target language and may require additional mediational support to participate effectively. Under such circumstances, Malay may function as a shared linguistic resource that enables learners to negotiate understanding, coordinate group activity, and maintain communicative momentum. Examining these processes is essential for understanding how learning unfolds within peer-only interaction.

1.4. Translanguaging and Multilingual Meaning-Making

While SCT provides the primary theoretical framework for this study, translanguaging perspectives offer complementary insights into multilingual language practices. Translanguaging challenges traditional conceptions of bilingualism that treat languages as separate and autonomous systems. Instead, bilingual speakers are viewed as drawing flexibly upon integrated linguistic repertoires to achieve communicative and cognitive goals (García & Li Wei, 2014).

Within educational contexts, translanguaging highlights how learners utilise multiple linguistic resources to support comprehension, participation, and knowledge construction. Research suggests that multilingual practices can facilitate vocabulary learning, problem-solving, conceptual understanding, and classroom engagement. Importantly, translanguaging is not viewed as random language mixing but as purposeful and context-sensitive action shaped by interactional demands.

For low-proficiency learners, translanguaging may provide an important mechanism for managing the cognitive and emotional demands of English-mediated tasks. By allowing learners to access familiar linguistic resources, translanguaging can reduce communicative pressure and create conditions that support meaningful participation. This perspective aligns closely with SCT's emphasis on mediation and provides an additional lens through which Malay use can be understood.

1.5. L1 Use in Malaysian Higher Education

Despite increasing international recognition of multilingual pedagogies, research on L1 use in Malaysian higher education remains relatively limited. Existing studies have documented positive attitudes toward code-switching and identified various

pedagogical functions of Malay, including clarification of instructions, vocabulary support, and enhanced classroom participation (Nordin et al., 2013; Alias & Muniandy, 2022). However, much of this research has relied on surveys, questionnaires, and interviews rather than direct analysis of classroom interaction.

As a result, relatively little is known about how Malay functions during naturally occurring peer discourse. Existing studies often focus on teacher practices or learner perceptions rather than examining moment-by-moment interactional processes. Furthermore, low-proficiency learners remain underrepresented in discourse-based investigations despite being among the groups most likely to rely on multilingual resources.

This gap is particularly significant because collaborative learning has become a prominent feature of university English courses. Understanding how learners actually use Malay during these interactions is essential for developing pedagogical approaches that reflect classroom realities rather than monolingual ideals.

1.6. Research Gap and Theoretical Positioning

Taken together, the literature reveals three significant gaps. First, there remains limited interactional evidence documenting how Malay is used during naturally occurring peer-group discussions. Second, low-proficiency learners remain underrepresented in discourse-focused research. Third, affective and relational dimensions of multilingual practice have received comparatively less attention than cognitive outcomes.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining naturally occurring peer interaction among low-proficiency Malay-speaking undergraduates in a Malaysian university context. Grounded in Sociocultural Theory and informed by translanguaging perspectives, it investigates how Malay functions as a mediational resource that supports cognition, collaboration, and emotional engagement during English-mediated learning activities.

Accordingly, this study aims to (1) identify learners' motivations for using Malay during English-mediated peer discussions; (2) examine the cognitive, social, interactional, and affective functions served by Malay during collaborative tasks; and (3) determine how Malay shapes participation, emotional engagement, group dynamics, and movement towards English production.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate how Malay functions as a mediational resource during English-mediated peer-group discussions among low-proficiency undergraduate learners in a Malaysian higher education context. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to examine language use as a socially situated and context-dependent phenomenon rather than as a measurable linguistic variable. Consistent with an interpretivist epistemological orientation, the research aimed to understand participants' language choices from the perspective of their lived experiences and interactional practices.

The study was informed by Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which conceptualises learning as a socially mediated process occurring through interaction with others and engagement with cultural tools. From this perspective, Malay was examined not as interference to English learning but as a mediational resource through which learners regulated cognition, coordinated social activity, and managed affective demands during collaborative tasks.

A case study design was selected because it allows detailed investigation of complex social phenomena within their natural context (Yin, 2018). Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the study prioritised depth of analysis and contextual understanding. The case consisted of a group of low-proficiency Malay-speaking undergraduates enrolled in an English language proficiency course at a Malaysian public university.

2.2. Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in a CEFR-aligned English language proficiency course at a Malaysian public university. This context was selected because it represents a setting in which English-only expectations coexist with multilingual classroom realities. Collaborative learning activities formed a regular component of classroom instruction, providing opportunities for naturally occurring peer interaction.

Participants consisted of six female undergraduate students who shared Malay as their primary first language and were identified as having low English proficiency through institutional placement procedures and instructor evaluation. Purposive criterion-based sampling was employed to ensure that participants possessed characteristics directly relevant to the research objectives. Focusing on a relatively homogeneous participant group enabled detailed examination of interactional practices without the confounding influence of substantial proficiency or linguistic variation.

Although the sample size was small, this is consistent with qualitative interaction-based research that prioritises analytic depth over breadth. The objective was not to generate statistically representative findings but to develop a nuanced understanding of how multilingual resources function within a specific educational context.

2.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through two complementary methods: video-recorded peer-group discussions and stimulated recall interviews.

2.3.1. Peer-Group Discussions

The primary dataset consisted of naturally occurring peer-group discussions conducted as part of regular classroom activities. Participants completed collaborative English-mediated tasks that required discussion, idea generation, problem-solving, and oral presentation planning. These interactions were audio- and video-recorded to capture both verbal and non-verbal dimensions of communication.

The use of naturally occurring interaction enabled examination of language practices as they emerged in real-time rather than relying solely on retrospective accounts. This

approach was particularly important because language choices often occur spontaneously and may not be fully accessible through self-report methods alone.

2.3.2. Stimulated Recall Interviews

To complement the interactional data, stimulated recall interviews were conducted following the discussion tasks. During these interviews, participants reviewed selected extracts from their recorded interactions and reflected on their language choices, communicative intentions, and decision-making processes.

Stimulated recall interviews provided access to participants' metacognitive perspectives and helped illuminate the motivations underlying observed interactional practices. The interviews therefore functioned as a complementary source of evidence rather than an independent dataset.

2.4. Data Analysis

2.4.1. Analysis proceeded in two stages.

First, interactional analysis was conducted on the recorded peer discussions. Episodes involving shifts between Malay and English were identified and examined in relation to their interactional context, communicative purpose, and contribution to task progression. Particular attention was given to instances of cognitive mediation, negotiation of meaning, peer scaffolding, task management, and affective support.

Second, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was applied to the stimulated recall interviews. Interview transcripts were coded inductively and iteratively to identify recurring themes concerning learners' motivations for language choice, perceptions of Malay use, and experiences of participation during English-mediated tasks.

The findings from both datasets were subsequently integrated to develop a comprehensive understanding of the cognitive, social, and affective functions of Malay within peer interaction.

2.5. Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. First, methodological triangulation was achieved through the combination of interactional data and stimulated recall interviews. This enabled findings to be examined from both behavioural and reflective perspectives.

Second, prolonged engagement with the dataset facilitated in-depth familiarisation with participants' interactional practices and supported the development of contextually grounded interpretations.

Third, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, documenting data collection procedures, analytical decisions, coding development, and interpretive reflections. This enhanced the transparency and dependability of the study.

Fourth, reflexive practice was incorporated throughout analysis. Given the researcher's familiarity with the linguistic and educational context under investigation, ongoing attention was paid to potential assumptions and interpretive biases.

These strategies align with established qualitative criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authorities prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent before involvement in the study.

To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were used throughout data transcription, analysis, and reporting. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. All digital recordings, transcripts, and related research materials were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher.

Given the bilingual nature of the data, particular care was taken during transcription and translation procedures to preserve meaning while ensuring analytical accuracy. Translation decisions were documented and reviewed throughout the research process to maintain transparency and interpretive consistency.

3. Results

Analysis of the peer-group discussions and stimulated recall interviews revealed that Malay functioned as a significant mediational resource throughout task completion. Three interrelated functions emerged consistently across the dataset: (1) cognitive mediation, (2) social and interactional mediation, and (3) affective mediation. Rather than replacing English, Malay was strategically deployed to support engagement with English-mediated tasks and facilitate collaborative meaning-making.

3.1. Malay as a Cognitive Mediational Resource

One of the most prominent findings concerned the use of Malay to support cognitive processing during task completion. Participants frequently shifted to Malay when encountering lexical uncertainty, conceptual difficulty, or challenges in generating ideas. These shifts enabled learners to maintain task momentum and collaboratively develop understanding before re-engaging with English.

3.1.1. Vocabulary Retrieval and Conceptual Clarification

The following extract illustrates how participants used Malay to clarify unfamiliar vocabulary during a group discussion (see Table 1).

In this extract, Malay functioned as a mediational bridge between an unfamiliar English lexical item and a concept already understood by participants. Rather than abandoning the discussion, learners used Malay to establish shared understanding before returning to English. This process reflects Vygotskian notions of mediation, whereby language serves as a tool for organising thought and supporting problem-solving (Vygotsky, 1978).

Table 1: Vocabulary Clarification

Line	Speaker	Utterance
1	S1	What does interpersonal mean?
2	S2	Interpersonal tu hubungan dengan orang lain.
3	S1	Oh, relationship with others?
4	S2	Yes, relationship with people.
5	S1	Okay, we can put communication skills.

Stimulated recall interviews further revealed that participants viewed such language shifts as necessary for maintaining comprehension and avoiding misunderstanding. Several participants reported that using Malay enabled them to focus on task completion rather than becoming preoccupied with linguistic uncertainty.

3.1.2. Idea Generation and Task Planning

Participants also used Malay during planning stages when generating and organising ideas.

The interactional data indicated that learners frequently discussed concepts in Malay before translating them into English for final presentation. This pattern suggests that Malay functioned as a cognitive workspace in which participants could explore ideas with reduced linguistic constraints.

Rather than representing avoidance of English, these episodes illustrate strategic deployment of linguistic resources to facilitate subsequent English production. Such findings align with sociocultural accounts of language as a mediational tool that supports higher-order thinking and collaborative problem-solving.

3.2. Malay as a Social and Interactional Resource

Beyond cognitive functions, Malay played an important role in coordinating interaction and sustaining collaborative participation.

3.2.1. Negotiation of Meaning

Participants frequently shifted to Malay when negotiating understanding or resolving misunderstandings (see Table 2).

In this interaction, Malay enabled participants to restore intersubjectivity and maintain progress toward task completion. Rather than disrupting communication, the shift to Malay facilitated mutual understanding and allowed participants to continue collaborating effectively.

Such episodes demonstrate how multilingual resources contribute to the maintenance of shared understanding, a prerequisite for successful collaborative dialogue.

Table 2: Negotiating Meaning

Line	Speaker	Utterance
1	S3	I don't understand this part.
2	S4	Maksud dia kita kena bagi contoh.
3	S3	Oh, bagi example lah?
4	S4	Ya, then explain why.
5	S3	Okay, I understand now.

3.2.2. Peer Scaffolding

The data further revealed numerous instances of peer scaffolding. Participants routinely provided explanations, prompts, lexical suggestions, and confirmations in Malay to support one another's participation.

These interactional practices illustrate how learners collectively constructed knowledge through distributed expertise. Assistance emerged organically from within the group rather than being imposed by an external authority. Consequently, mediation occurred horizontally through peer relationships rather than vertically through teacher intervention.

This finding extends previous sociocultural research by demonstrating that low-proficiency learners are capable of providing meaningful support to one another despite limited English proficiency.

3.3. Malay as an Affective Resource

Perhaps the most distinctive finding concerns the affective functions of Malay. While previous studies have frequently emphasised cognitive benefits of L1 use, the present data suggest that emotional regulation was equally significant.

3.3.1. Reducing Anxiety and Protecting Face

Participants consistently reported that Malay provided a sense of security during challenging communicative moments.

Several learners explained during stimulated recall interviews that exclusive use of English increased anxiety and fear of making mistakes. In contrast, Malay enabled them to express uncertainty, seek assistance, and participate without concern about negative evaluation.

This affective support was visible within interactional data through laughter, reassurance, encouragement, and collaborative problem-solving sequences. Malay therefore functioned not merely as a linguistic resource but also as an emotional resource that lowered participation barriers and facilitated engagement.

3.3.2. Maintaining Group Cohesion

Malay additionally contributed to relationship building and group solidarity.

Participants used Malay to manage disagreement, negotiate roles, and maintain positive interpersonal relationships throughout task completion. These interactional practices helped sustain collaborative engagement and created an environment in which learners felt comfortable contributing ideas.

The findings suggest that language choice is deeply intertwined with social relationships and cannot be understood solely in cognitive terms.

3.4. Synthesis of Results

Across the dataset, Malay functioned as a multifunctional mediational resource that supported cognition, interaction, and affect simultaneously.

Rather than serving as a substitute for English, Malay enabled learners to remain engaged in English-mediated tasks by providing temporary support during moments of difficulty. Language choice was strategic, context-sensitive, and responsive to interactional demands.

These findings challenge deficit-oriented interpretations of L1 use and instead position multilingual practices as legitimate resources for learning. From a sociocultural perspective, Malay served as a mediational tool through which learners regulated cognition, coordinated participation, and sustained engagement within collaborative learning environments.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Malay functioned as a significant mediational resource during English-mediated peer-group discussions among low-proficiency undergraduates. Across interactional episodes and stimulated recall interviews, participants strategically employed Malay to facilitate cognitive processing, sustain collaborative interaction, and regulate emotional engagement. These findings challenge deficit-oriented interpretations of first-language use and contribute to growing evidence that multilingual practices can support rather than hinder second-language learning. This discussion interprets the findings through the lens of Sociocultural Theory and translanguaging scholarship while considering their implications for multilingual higher education contexts.

4.1. Reframing L1 Use: From Linguistic Deficiency to Mediational Resource

One of the most significant contributions of the study lies in its challenge to dominant assumptions that equate L1 use with inadequate English proficiency. Traditional English-only pedagogies often conceptualise first-language use as a sign of learner dependence or failure to engage with the target language (Macaro, 2009). The findings presented here suggest a fundamentally different interpretation.

Rather than functioning as an obstacle to English learning, Malay served as a mediational resource that enabled learners to remain engaged in English-mediated tasks. Participants consistently utilised Malay at moments of cognitive complexity, lexical uncertainty, and interactional difficulty. Importantly, these shifts did not replace English but instead facilitated continued participation in English-oriented activity.

From a sociocultural perspective, this pattern reflects Vygotsky's (1978) conception of mediation, whereby learners draw upon available cultural tools to regulate cognition and action. Language choice therefore cannot be reduced to a simple distinction between target-language use and non-target-language use. Instead, it represents a strategic process through which learners mobilise resources to accomplish communicative and learning goals.

The findings thus support arguments by Cook (2001) and Cummins (2021) that multilingual learners should not be viewed through monolingual norms. Evaluating bilingual learners according to English-only expectations obscures the complex ways in which linguistic resources are deployed to support learning.

4.2. Malay as Sociocultural Scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development

The findings also provide evidence for the relevance of Sociocultural Theory in understanding multilingual classroom interaction. Participants frequently used Malay to clarify concepts, retrieve vocabulary, negotiate meaning, and coordinate task completion. These interactional practices illustrate how learning was mediated through collaborative activity rather than individual performance.

A particularly important finding concerns the role of peer interaction in creating opportunities for scaffolding. Consistent with Donato's (1994) notion of collective scaffolding, learners jointly supported one another's development through explanation, prompting, reformulation, and confirmation. These forms of assistance enabled participants to move beyond what they could accomplish independently.

The findings therefore extend conventional interpretations of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). While the ZPD is often associated with teacher-led instruction, the present study demonstrates that mediation can emerge within symmetrical peer relationships. Low-proficiency learners were not passive recipients of support but active contributors to one another's learning. Even participants with limited English proficiency possessed valuable linguistic and conceptual resources that could be shared within the group.

This finding is particularly significant because low-proficiency learners are often portrayed as lacking the competence required for meaningful collaboration. The data suggest the opposite. Participants collectively constructed understanding through interaction and used Malay strategically to facilitate movement toward English production.

4.3. Translanguaging as Strategic Meaning-Making

The findings further support translanguaging perspectives that conceptualise multilingual language use as purposeful and context-sensitive rather than random language mixing. Participants moved flexibly between Malay and English according to interactional demands, task requirements, and communicative goals.

These shifts were particularly evident during moments requiring conceptual exploration, vocabulary clarification, and collaborative planning. Rather than operating through separate linguistic systems, learners appeared to draw upon integrated linguistic repertoires to construct meaning and solve problems. This observation aligns

with García and Li Wei's (2014) argument that bilingual speakers utilise their full linguistic resources to navigate communicative situations.

Importantly, translanguaging practices observed in the present study were highly strategic. Participants frequently discussed ideas in Malay before reformulating them in English for task completion. Such sequences suggest that Malay functioned as a cognitive workspace that facilitated subsequent English production.

These findings challenge concerns that translanguaging inevitably reduces exposure to the target language. Instead, they indicate that strategic multilingual practices may support engagement with English by reducing cognitive overload and enabling learners to sustain participation in complex communicative tasks.

4.4. Affective Regulation and Participation

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of the study concerns the affective dimension of multilingual mediation. While much previous research has focused on cognitive benefits of L1 use, the findings reveal that emotional regulation played an equally important role.

Participants consistently described Malay as providing psychological security during English-mediated interaction. The use of Malay enabled learners to express uncertainty, seek clarification, and participate without fear of negative evaluation. These findings resonate with Pavlenko and Lantolf's (2000) argument that language learning is deeply intertwined with emotional experience and identity negotiation.

From a sociocultural perspective, affect cannot be separated from cognition. Learning occurs within social relationships that shape learners' willingness to participate, take risks, and engage with challenges. By reducing anxiety and supporting confidence, Malay created conditions that enabled sustained participation in collaborative activity.

The findings therefore suggest that multilingual practices should not be evaluated solely in terms of linguistic outcomes. Their contribution to emotional well-being and participation may be equally important, particularly for learners operating within high-stakes academic environments.

4.5. Implications for Malaysian Higher Education

The study also carries important implications for English language education in Malaysia. Current educational policies frequently emphasise English proficiency while paying limited attention to the multilingual realities of classroom interaction. As a result, learners may experience tension between institutional expectations and practical communicative needs.

The findings suggest that rigid English-only approaches may overlook valuable learning opportunities. Rather than prohibiting Malay use, educators may benefit from recognising the specific circumstances under which multilingual practices support learning. Strategic use of Malay during planning, clarification, and collaborative problem-solving stages may facilitate rather than impede engagement with English.

Importantly, the findings do not imply that English should be replaced as the primary language of instruction. Instead, they support a balanced pedagogical approach in which multilingual resources are recognised as legitimate tools for learning while English remains the primary target language.

Such an approach aligns more closely with the sociolinguistic realities of Malaysian higher education and may contribute to more inclusive and equitable learning environments for students with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

4.6. Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

The study contributes theoretically by extending sociocultural understandings of mediation within multilingual peer interaction. While previous research has often focused on teacher-mediated scaffolding, the findings demonstrate how mediation emerges through collaborative learner–learner interaction among low-proficiency students.

Methodologically, the study contributes interaction-based evidence to a body of literature that has frequently relied on surveys and attitude measures. By combining naturally occurring interactional data with stimulated recall interviews, the research provides a richer understanding of multilingual practices than would be possible through either method alone.

Together, these contributions strengthen current understandings of how multilingual learners mobilise linguistic resources to support cognition, participation, and development within higher education contexts.

4.7. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for language teaching, curriculum design, and language policy in multilingual higher education contexts. Most significantly, they challenge the assumption that effective English language learning requires strict adherence to English-only pedagogies. The evidence presented in this study suggests that low-proficiency learners strategically utilise Malay to support comprehension, participation, collaboration, and emotional engagement during English-mediated tasks. Rather than hindering learning, Malay functioned as a resource that enabled learners to remain actively involved in the learning process.

For classroom practitioners, these findings suggest the need for a more flexible and context-sensitive approach to language use. Teachers should recognise that strategic use of learners' first language can facilitate engagement with complex tasks, particularly during planning, brainstorming, and problem-solving activities. Allowing limited and purposeful use of Malay during these stages may help learners develop ideas more effectively before expressing them in English. Such an approach acknowledges learners' existing linguistic resources while maintaining English as the primary target language. The findings also highlight the importance of collaborative learning environments. Peer-group discussions provided opportunities for learners to scaffold one another's understanding through explanation, clarification, and negotiation of meaning. Educators should therefore design tasks that encourage interaction, collaborative problem-solving, and learner autonomy. Structured peer activities can create opportunities for

meaningful language use while simultaneously supporting cognitive and social development.

Another important implication concerns learner affect. Participants consistently reported that Malay reduced anxiety and increased confidence during English-mediated interaction. This suggests that emotional factors should receive greater attention within language classrooms. Excessively restrictive language policies may inadvertently discourage participation among lower-proficiency learners by increasing communicative pressure and fear of error. Teachers should therefore consider how classroom language policies influence not only linguistic outcomes but also learners' willingness to participate and take risks.

At the curriculum level, the findings support pedagogical approaches that recognise multilingualism as an educational resource rather than a problem to be eliminated. Curriculum developers may benefit from incorporating structured opportunities for multilingual mediation within task-based learning activities. Such practices could include bilingual planning stages, collaborative vocabulary exploration, and reflective discussion of language choice strategies.

Finally, the findings have implications for teacher education. Many language teachers continue to operate within monolingual pedagogical traditions despite working in multilingual environments. Teacher preparation programmes should therefore provide greater exposure to Sociocultural Theory, translanguaging pedagogy, and multilingual approaches to language learning. Developing teachers' understanding of multilingual mediation may help them make more informed decisions regarding language use in the classroom and better support the needs of diverse learners.

4.8. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study involved a relatively small sample of six participants from a single Malaysian public university. While this sample size is appropriate for qualitative interaction-based research, the findings cannot be generalised statistically to all Malaysian university students or multilingual learning contexts. Instead, the study provides contextually grounded insights into a specific group of learners operating within a particular educational setting.

Second, all participants were female undergraduates who shared similar linguistic and educational backgrounds. It is possible that interactional practices, language choices, and affective experiences may differ in mixed-gender groups or among learners from different sociolinguistic backgrounds. Future studies should therefore examine a wider range of participant profiles to explore how gender, ethnicity, and educational experience may shape multilingual interaction.

Third, the study focused exclusively on low-proficiency learners. Although this focus was theoretically justified, it limits understanding of how multilingual mediation may function among learners with intermediate or advanced levels of English proficiency. Future research could investigate how proficiency influences the frequency, function, and effectiveness of first-language use during collaborative tasks.

Fourth, the study examined spoken peer interaction within a single English language course. Other learning contexts, including disciplinary courses, online learning environments, and teacher-led classroom interaction, may generate different patterns of multilingual practice. Future research should explore how Malay functions across a broader range of educational settings.

A further limitation concerns the study's focus on interactional processes rather than measurable language outcomes. While the findings demonstrate how Malay supports participation and meaning-making, the study does not examine whether such practices lead to long-term improvements in English proficiency. Future research could combine interactional analysis with longitudinal designs to investigate relationships between multilingual mediation and language development over time.

Finally, although stimulated recall interviews provided valuable insight into participants' perspectives, retrospective accounts may be influenced by memory limitations and post-hoc rationalisation. Future studies could incorporate additional data sources, such as learner journals or classroom observations, to further strengthen understanding of learners' decision-making processes.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes important interactional evidence to ongoing debates concerning multilingual pedagogy and first-language use in second-language learning. Future research building on these findings can further expand understanding of multilingual mediation across diverse educational contexts.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the role of Malay as a mediational resource during English-mediated peer-group discussions among low-proficiency undergraduate learners in a Malaysian higher education context. Drawing upon Sociocultural Theory and informed by translanguage perspectives, the research investigated learners' motivations for using Malay, the functions Malay served during collaborative tasks, and the ways in which language choice shaped participation, emotional engagement, and group dynamics.

The findings demonstrate that Malay played a significant role in supporting learning and interaction. Participants strategically employed Malay to facilitate vocabulary retrieval, clarify complex concepts, negotiate meaning, coordinate collaborative activity, and regulate emotional responses to communicative challenges. These multilingual practices were not random or compensatory but were purposeful responses to the cognitive, social, and affective demands of English-mediated tasks.

Importantly, the findings challenge deficit-oriented interpretations of first-language use that continue to influence many language education contexts. Rather than hindering English learning, Malay functioned as a mediational tool that enabled learners to sustain engagement with English-oriented activities. Through collaborative dialogue, participants utilised Malay to scaffold one another's understanding, maintain interactional momentum, and create supportive learning environments that encouraged participation.

The study also contributes to theoretical discussions within Sociocultural Theory by demonstrating how mediation emerges through peer interaction among low-proficiency

learners. While much previous research has emphasised teacher-led scaffolding, the present findings illustrate the importance of learner–learner mediation in creating opportunities for development within collaborative learning environments. Furthermore, the findings support translanguaging perspectives by highlighting how multilingual learners draw flexibly upon integrated linguistic repertoires to accomplish communicative and learning goals.

Methodologically, the study contributes interaction-based evidence to a field that has often relied on attitudinal surveys and perception-based data. The combination of interactional analysis and stimulated recall interviews provided a comprehensive understanding of multilingual practices from both observable and participant perspectives.

Overall, the study argues that understanding multilingual learning requires moving beyond monolingual assumptions about language use. Learners do not simply choose between separate languages; rather, they strategically mobilise available linguistic resources to support cognition, participation, and development. Recognising these practices is essential for developing more inclusive, equitable, and pedagogically effective approaches to language education in multilingual societies. In the Malaysian context and beyond, acknowledging the mediational role of learners' first languages may represent an important step toward more realistic and socially responsive models of English language teaching and learning.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval was obtained from UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA. All participants provided informed consent before taking part in the study.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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