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Curriculum responsiveness through fun english for asnaf young learners

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Abstract. *English language proficiency remains a persistent challenge among socioeconomically disadvantaged learners, particularly asnaf children who often have limited exposure to English beyond the classroom, and while the national English curriculum provides standardised learning outcomes, its implementation does not always fully address the diverse needs marginalised learners. This study, grounded in Goodlad's curriculum framework, investigates how a community based Fun English programme in Sintok, Kedah transformed the formal curriculum into more responsive practices for asnaf children. A qualitative case study design was employed involving 48 primary school asnaf students and 6 trainee teachers who engaged in a university led Fun English programme, with data collected through classroom observations, field notes, student artefacts, and semi structured interviews with facilitators and selected learners, while learning activities such as games, storytelling, collaborative tasks, role play, language competitions, and interactive communication exercises were aligned with national curriculum outcomes and analysed thematically through an iterative coding process guided by Goodlad's curriculum perspectives. The findings revealed three key themes, namely curriculum engagement through enjoyment, confidence building through supportive learning experiences and curriculum relevance through experiential learning. The study concludes that curriculum effectiveness is not only determined by prescribed content but also by how it is enacted and experienced, suggesting pedagogical innovation that enhanced curriculum responsiveness and supported meaningful English learning among asnaf learners.*

Keywords: curriculum responsiveness, Asnaf learners, fun English programme, Goodlad curriculum framework

INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency has long been recognised as a critical determinant of educational and socioeconomic mobility, yet it remains one of the most persistently unequal outcomes among learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Cross-national research in Asia, including Malaysia, has noted that countries with post-independence language planning policies show limited shifts toward English proficiency across socioeconomic groups, with access to the language remaining stratified by class and geography (Terasawa, 2026). This is a particularly pressing concern in Malaysia, where national education policy mandates English competency across all levels of schooling, yet structural inequalities continue to impede equitable outcomes (Ishak et al., 2025; Rashid, 2017). Studies consistently indicate that socioeconomic status is a significant predictor of English language acquisition, with learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds performing notably below their more privileged peers, owing to factors such as limited resource availability, diminished parental involvement, and reduced motivation (OECD, 2022; Terasawa, 2024).

Among the most vulnerable learners in this setting are asnaf children from zakat-recipient households who face compounding disadvantages that extend beyond economics. Underprivileged students frequently attend educational institutions where resources are limited and educational frameworks often lack cultural or contextual relevance, yet asnaf learners frequently demonstrate perseverance and resilience in their educational pursuits, suggesting

significant unrealised potential when appropriate support structures are provided (Ariffin et al., 2024; Omar, 2022; Umar Kassim et al., 2025). Many asnaf families are uneducated and possess limited capacity to guide their children's learning, and being economically constrained, they are unable to provide supplementary tuition, which often results in low academic achievement, particularly in English (Ariffin et al., 2024; Omar, 2022; Poh et al., 2019). Such disadvantages are often reinforced by intergenerational inequalities in educational capital and learning opportunities (Ilie et al., 2021).

Malaysia's national English curriculum, aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), aspires to raise proficiency levels across all socioeconomic groups. However, research has revealed that insufficient teacher training and limited contextualisation of CEFR-aligned curricula hinder successful implementation, particularly in rural and low-enrolment schools, constraining students' opportunities for genuine communicative development (Hamid et al., 2025; Nawai & Said, 2020). This gap between the formal curriculum (the prescribed curriculum) and the experiential curriculum (the experienced curriculum) is precisely what Goodlad's curriculum framework illuminates. Goodlad (1979) identified five curriculum perspectives: ideological, formal, perceived, operational, and experiential, with the experiential curriculum representing what learners actually experience, which often diverges substantially from officially approved content. Goodlad's approach underscores the need for a curriculum that is responsive to societal changes and learner diversity, making it a holistic framework for evaluating whether educational practices are genuinely serving all students.

It is within this space between prescription and lived experience that innovative, community-based pedagogical interventions hold transformative potential. Research on game-based and interactive learning demonstrates that gamified and immersive environments significantly enhance learner engagement and language skill development, with situated learning theory positing that deep engagement through play is essential for language acquisition (Alejandra et al., 2025; Fachri et al., 2025). Studies exploring gamification in English language teaching have found that incorporating interactive board games and role-playing scenarios significantly increases student participation and knowledge retention (Tari et al., 2023; Kaygısız, & Akar, 2025). Similarly, another research found that game-based learning approaches positively influenced primary school students' engagement and motivation in learning Science, highlighting the pedagogical value of well-aligned educational game elements (Fauziyah et al., 2024; Muhammad Najih Al Azizi & Nina Sofiana, 2025; Sairiyah et al., 2025).

Beyond games, experiential and community-grounded learning models have shown particular promise for marginalised learners. Service-learning initiatives embedded in Malaysian university frameworks demonstrate that applying classroom knowledge to real-world community scenarios reinforces academic concepts, builds practical skills, and addresses specific community needs such as education and social welfare (Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2025). The role of university-community engagement in reaching underserved populations is thus well established, yet empirical studies examining how such programmes translate formal curriculum objectives into responsive, enjoyable learning experiences for asnaf children in rural settings remain limited (Aziz et al., 2025). This study addresses that gap by examining how a university-led Fun English programme in Sintok, Kedah enacted Goodlad's curriculum perspectives in practice, transforming standardised learning outcomes into equitable and experiential learning opportunities for asnaf children.

The persistent gap in English language achievement across socioeconomic groups should no longer be interpreted as an issue of individual learner ability but rather as a structurally produced inequality embedded within educational ecosystems. Recent international evidence continues to show that socioeconomic status remains one of the most powerful predictors of language achievement, largely due to unequal access to linguistic capital, digital resources, and enrichment opportunities (UNESCO, 2023). Importantly, this gap is not narrowing despite curriculum reforms, suggesting that policy-level interventions alone are insufficient.

What is increasingly evident in contemporary research is that language learning inequality is reproduced through everyday schooling practices rather than merely external socioeconomic conditions. Studies across multiple contexts show that classroom input quality, teacher expectations, and access to extended language use significantly mediate outcomes for disadvantaged learners (Erling et al., 2021; Uccelli, 2023). This challenges the assumption that exposure to English in formal schooling is equalising. Instead, schools often reproduce inequality through differentiated instructional quality.

At the same time, emerging equity scholarship disrupts deficit narratives around low-income learners. Research demonstrates that learners from marginalised backgrounds can achieve comparable outcomes when provided with sustained scaffolding and culturally responsive instruction (Shukla et al., 2022). This positions inequality not as inevitability, but as pedagogical design failure.

Educational psychology offers a critical lens for explaining why socioeconomic disparities translate into language learning gaps. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory remains particularly relevant, especially its emphasis on mediation, scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development. Recent work in second language acquisition confirms that language development is fundamentally socially mediated and dependent on structured interaction rather than passive exposure (Alkhudiry, 2022).

However, sociocultural theory alone does not fully explain learner disengagement in low-resource contexts. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a complementary explanation by foregrounding motivational conditions. When autonomy, competence, and relatedness are undermined, learners demonstrate reduced persistence in language learning tasks regardless of cognitive ability (Panhwar et al., 2025). In under-resourced classrooms, these psychological needs are often structurally constrained, particularly where teaching is exam-oriented and teacher-centred.

Goodlad's curriculum framework becomes highly useful here because it exposes the multi-layered nature of curriculum reality. His distinction between ideological, formal, perceived, operational, and experiential curricula highlights the instability of curriculum translation. Recent curriculum theorists extend this argument by showing that experiential curriculum is where reform success or failure is ultimately determined (Aksoy, 2020). From this perspective, CEFR reform can be interpreted as structurally incomplete because it overemphasises formal curriculum while under-theorising experiential curriculum. This gap is particularly visible in marginalised learning environments where resource constraints intensify implementation breakdown.

Gamification has emerged as a powerful response to disengagement in language learning, yet its effectiveness is not merely technological but psychological and pedagogical. Recent meta-analyses confirm that gamified learning environments significantly improve motivation, engagement, and retention in second language learning contexts (Adaji et al., 2020; Monazamtabrizi et al., 2026; Zhao et al., 2022). However, the argument should not be reduced to "games improve learning." The more important issue is why they work. From a psychological perspective, gamification operates by activating motivational mechanisms aligned with Self-Determination Theory, particularly autonomy through choice-based interaction, competence through feedback systems, and relatedness through collaborative tasks.

The central argument emerging from this literature is therefore clear that improving English language outcomes among marginalised learners requires not more curriculum reform, but a redesign of experiential learning environments where psychological, social, and curricular systems align.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore a university led Fun English programme for 48 asnaf primary school learners and 6 trainee teachers in a rural community based setting (Yin, 2014). Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the study examined how English learning was experienced through experiential curriculum enactment within game based and interactive pedagogical activities. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure information rich cases representing varied English proficiency levels (Palinkas et al., 2015). The programme integrated language games, storytelling, role play, collaborative tasks, and communication activities aligned with national curriculum outcomes.

Data were collected through classroom observations, field notes, student artefacts, and semi structured interviews with learners and facilitators. Thematic analysis was conducted iteratively using inductive coding, informed by Goodlad's curriculum framework, particularly the experiential curriculum perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and audit trail procedures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) while ethical approval, informed consent, and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In line with the qualitative case study design, the analysis draws on multiple data sources, including classroom observations, field notes, student artefacts, and semi structured interviews with both learners and trainee teachers. The findings are organised around three emergent themes: curriculum engagement through enjoyment, confidence building through supportive learning environments, and curriculum relevance through experiential learning. Each theme is presented with supporting evidence from multiple data sets to ensure triangulation and analytical depth. Table 1 shows the reduction of codes to operationalisation of the themes.

Table 1. Abstraction from codes to concepts

Sample Data Extract	Initial Codes	Categories	Theme
"I don't feel scared because it is like play time, but we still learn English" (Student 5)	Reduced anxiety; enjoyment of learning; positive emotions	Enjoyable learning experiences	Curriculum Engagement Through Enjoyment
"Students who were previously silent immediately raised hands when points were introduced" (Field Notes)	Increased participation; response to game mechanics	Active learner participation	Curriculum Engagement Through Enjoyment
"If we play game, I can speak English more. If just textbook, I quiet only" (Student 18)	Preference for interactive learning; willingness to communicate	Engagement through gamified activities	Curriculum Engagement Through Enjoyment
"Even weak students started competing to answer" (Trainee Teacher 2)	Increased involvement of low proficiency learners	Inclusive participation	Curriculum Engagement Through Enjoyment
Increased task completion rates during game-based activities	Sustained engagement; task persistence	Behavioural engagement	Curriculum Engagement Through Enjoyment
"Before this I takut speak English. Now I try because my friend also try" (Student 2)	Reduced fear; peer influence	Peer-supported confidence development	Confidence Building Through Supportive Learning Experiences
"Teacher say wrong also okay, so I try speak more" (Student 11)	Psychological safety; willingness to take risks	Safe learning environment	Confidence Building Through Supportive Learning Experiences
"Students initiate English questions without teacher prompting" (Field Notes)	Self-initiated communication; learner agency	Emerging confidence in communication	Confidence Building Through Supportive Learning Experiences
"Confidence grows when we stop correcting immediately" (Trainee Teacher 1)	Reduced fear of errors; supportive feedback	Non-threatening facilitation	Confidence Building Through Supportive Learning Experiences
Increased sentence length and fewer blank responses in tasks	Increased willingness to attempt language production	Evidence of growing confidence	Confidence Building Through Supportive Learning Experiences
"English is for talking, not only exam" (Student 6)	Reframing purpose of English; communicative orientation	Perceived relevance of English	Curriculum Relevance Through Experiential Learning
"Now I know English can use outside school also" (Student 22)	Real-world application; transfer of learning	Authentic language use	Curriculum Relevance Through Experiential Learning
"They started connecting English with real life situations" (Trainee Teacher 3)	Contextualised learning	Meaningful curriculum experiences	Curriculum Relevance Through Experiential Learning
"Students used English spontaneously during group problem-solving" (Field Notes)	Authentic communication; contextual language use	Experiential meaning-making	Curriculum Relevance Through Experiential Learning
Role-play scripts involving ordering food, asking questions, and negotiating	Functional language use; real-world communication	Application beyond textbook learning	Curriculum Relevance Through Experiential Learning

Theme 1: Curriculum Engagement Through Enjoyment

The data reveal that enjoyment was not merely an affective outcome but functioned as a structural entry point into English curriculum participation. Learners who were initially silent or hesitant became active contributors when learning was structured around game mechanics,

particularly reward and competition structures, as evidenced in classroom observation that "Shahir and Marsya who were previously silent immediately raised hands when points were introduced in vocabulary game" (Field Notes, Week 2). This shift suggests that engagement was not simply increased but redistributed, with game structures functioning as an access mechanism that lowered participation thresholds for low proficiency learners. Similarly, "group competition triggered spontaneous English utterances, even among low proficiency learners like Syed, Aina and Azila" (Field Notes, Week 12), indicating that linguistic risk-taking was mediated by the motivational framing of the activity rather than prior language confidence. One learner noted, "I don't feel scared because it is like play time but we still learn English" (Interview Student 5), suggesting a reduction in affective filter consistent with language acquisition theories of anxiety reduction. The perception that "English become fun now, not like before so boring" (Interview Student 33) further signals a shift in motivational orientation, which aligns with Self-Determination Theory's proposition that intrinsic motivation is strengthened when learning environments support autonomy and enjoyment (Raes et al., 2020). One of the trainee teachers noted a deeper pedagogical implication, stating that "they don't realise they are actually learning grammar because they are too focused on winning" (Trainee Teacher 4), which indicates that cognitive engagement was embedded within motivational engagement rather than explicitly foregrounded instruction. This aligns with gamification literature which argues that game mechanics can embed learning within goal-driven behaviour without reducing cognitive load (Fachri et al., 2025).

Theme 2: Confidence Building Through Supportive Learning Experiences

Confidence emerged as a gradual yet observable outcome of learners' participation in socially supportive and psychologically safe learning environments. Data suggest that learners' willingness to use English increased over the course of the programme as anxiety diminished and opportunities for supported interaction expanded. Early observations revealed a classroom culture characterised by hesitation and self-consciousness, where "Lila, Hasrin and Zain avoid eye contact when asked to speak English," "only high proficiency learners respond voluntarily," and "group leaders dominate English speaking tasks" (Field Notes Week 5). Such behaviours suggest that many learners initially perceived English communication as a high-risk activity, reinforcing previous research which associates low confidence with fear of negative evaluation and language anxiety (Dar & Khan, 2015). As the programme progressed, however, participation patterns began to shift. Field Notes Week 10 recorded that "more students begin attempting single-word answers during role-play," while "peer prompting increases participation among quieter learners" and "laughter reduces hesitation during speaking tasks." These observations indicate that learners were gradually moving from peripheral participation towards more active engagement. Rather than confidence preceding participation, the findings suggest that confidence was constructed through participation itself. This interpretation is further supported by learners' own accounts. One learner reflected, "Before this I am afraid to speak English. Now I try because my friend also try" (Interview Student 21), highlighting the importance of peer modelling in reducing communicative anxiety. Similarly, another learner explained that "Teacher say wrong also okay, so I try speak more" (Interview Student 11), suggesting that a non-judgemental environment encouraged experimentation and risk-taking. The data suggest that confidence developed not because learners suddenly became more proficient, but because the learning environment systematically reduced the psychological risks associated with participation. The findings also resonate with Sociocultural Theory, which views learning as socially mediated through interaction with more capable peers and supportive communities of practice (Sa'diyah, 2020).

Theme 3: Curriculum relevance through experiential learning

The third theme reveals a significant transformation in how learners perceived the purpose and value of English, shifting from viewing it primarily as an examination subject to recognising it as a meaningful tool for communication and social interaction. Data consistently indicated that learners began using English beyond the boundaries of prescribed classroom tasks. Several participants explicitly contrasted their previous and current understandings of English learning. One learner stated, "English is for talking, not only exam" (Interview Student 6), revealing a shift from an assessment-oriented perspective towards a communicative orientation. Another remarked, "I use English when I play game and talk with friends" (Interview

Student 37), indicating that English had become embedded within social interaction rather than restricted to formal instructional contexts. Similar sentiments were expressed by learners who reported that “Now I know English can use outside school also” (Interview Student 22) and “Before I think English difficult, now I think it is useful” (Student 39). The perspectives of trainee teachers further corroborated this transformation. One facilitator observed that “they started connecting English with real life situations, not just textbook” (Trainee Teacher 3), highlighting the movement away from decontextualised learning towards practical application. Another reflected that “when we use role play like shop and restaurant, they suddenly become active speakers” (Trainee Teacher 5), suggesting that learners were more willing to engage when language tasks mirrored familiar social situations. These statements suggest that the programme enabled learners to reconstruct the meaning of English learning, moving from perceptions of difficulty and obligation towards perceptions of utility and relevance. Importantly, the issue was not merely that learners enjoyed the activities, but that they began to understand why English mattered within their own lives.

Evidence from learner artefacts further reinforced these findings. Role-play scripts demonstrated contextualised language use involving ordering food, asking for information, negotiating choices, and responding to everyday scenarios. Group posters increasingly incorporated environmental and social vocabulary drawn from learners’ immediate surroundings rather than relying solely on textbook expressions. Researchers also noted an increase in spontaneous English labels and phrases within collaborative group products, suggesting that learners were beginning to appropriate English for their own communicative purposes. Collectively, these artefacts indicate that language learning was extending beyond task completion and becoming integrated into learners’ meaning-making processes. However, the findings also extend existing scholarship by suggesting that curriculum relevance is not an inherent property of curriculum content itself. Instead, relevance appears to be produced through the ways curriculum is enacted, experienced, and negotiated by learners. In other words, the same curriculum objectives can be experienced as either meaningful or disconnected depending on the pedagogical conditions through which they are delivered. Moreover, the findings offer an important point of departure from some recent CEFR implementation studies, which frequently identify curriculum rigidity, assessment pressures, and implementation challenges as barriers to meaningful language learning (Zhang et al., 2025). While such constraints undoubtedly exist, the present study demonstrates that pedagogical flexibility can mitigate these limitations by creating opportunities for learners to experience curriculum objectives in authentic and socially relevant ways. Rather than requiring wholesale curriculum reform, the findings suggest that meaningful learning may emerge when educators create spaces for learners to encounter curriculum content through lived experience. This is particularly significant for asnaf learners, whose educational experiences are often characterised by limited exposure to authentic English communication.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how a university led Fun English programme supported English language learning among asnaf primary school learners through experiential curriculum enactment. Guided by Goodlad’s curriculum framework, the findings demonstrate that curriculum effectiveness is shaped not only by prescribed content but also by how learning is experienced in practice. Conclusively, the findings indicate that learners became more active, confident, and motivated when English learning was enjoyable, socially safe, and connected to authentic contexts. The study contributes to curriculum and language education literature by emphasising the centrality of the experiential curriculum in shaping learner outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged learners. It challenges deficit perspectives that attribute low participation to learner ability, instead highlighting the role of pedagogical design in enabling engagement and confidence. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that educators should prioritise experiential, interactive, and community based pedagogies to enhance equitable language learning opportunities. Teacher education programmes should also strengthen training in facilitative and learner centred approaches. In addition, collaboration between universities, schools, and communities should be expanded to support sustained educational enrichment.

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