

Ela-Vate English: Easing Learners' Anxiety through Beyond-The-Classroom Innovation

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.925ILEIID00002>

Received: 23 September 2025; Accepted: 30 September 2025; Published: 04 November 2025

ABSTRACT

In recent years, higher education has placed greater emphasis on English language proficiency as a key skill for academic success and employability. Despite this, many students still demonstrate inadequate proficiency levels. One major contributing factor is the elevated anxiety students experience when communicating in English within formal academic settings. Therefore, this study aims to examine the perceived benefits of students' participation in NDUM's homegrown English language activities (ELA) beyond classrooms as one of the means to reduce their anxiety when utilising English language for academic purposes. The design of ELA is informed by CEFR descriptors from A2 to B2 and beyond which promotes self-regulated and autonomous learning. The language activities offer students opportunities to use the English language in non-threatening, real-world contexts, which may reduce language anxiety and enhance communicative competence. The study adopted a quantitative approach to assess student responses and engagement with ELA. Findings suggest a positive acceptance of ELA as an innovative pedagogical tool that supports communicative competency and alleviates anxiety. Students reported increased confidence and perceived digital platforms as effective for interactive and authentic language use beyond classrooms. This study has produced tangible outcomes in a form of a pedagogical framework for the implementation of English language activities beyond classrooms that are aligned to CEFR, and as a mitigation plan for instructors to ease language learning anxiety among students at higher education. Additionally, the study highlights the potential of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), and digital platforms to extend language learning opportunities and foster an ecosystem that nurtures English language use beyond traditional academic settings.

Keywords: Beyond classroom, CEFR, English Language Activities (ELA), language anxiety, Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL)

INTRODUCTION

The demands of the twenty-first century higher education environment and the global workplace trigger a shift in the way English language is taught, studied, and assessed in Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions. English language is considered as the prime tool to achieve success in education, job applications and work promotion (Hiranburana et al., 2017).

Problem Statement

ELA is triggered by a pressing challenge encountered by selected higher education institutions that only allow limited contact hours and academic credit in learning English proficiency courses. This drawback needs to be addressed urgently as students at higher education are expected to be proficient in English Language for it is a 'compulsory' skill required by industry players (Satwant Singh et al., 2025). Apart from that, many research has revealed positive correlations between poor language proficiency with negative emotional constructs such as foreign language anxiety (FLA) (Li and Dewaele, 2021; Sudina and Plonsky, 2021). Anxiety related to language learning is a complex and intricate psychological dimension that can become a barrier for second or foreign language learners (Aslan & Thompson, 2018). Foreign language anxiety also may significantly affect the "domains of language achievement, learners' actual proficiency and performance, gender, prior foreign

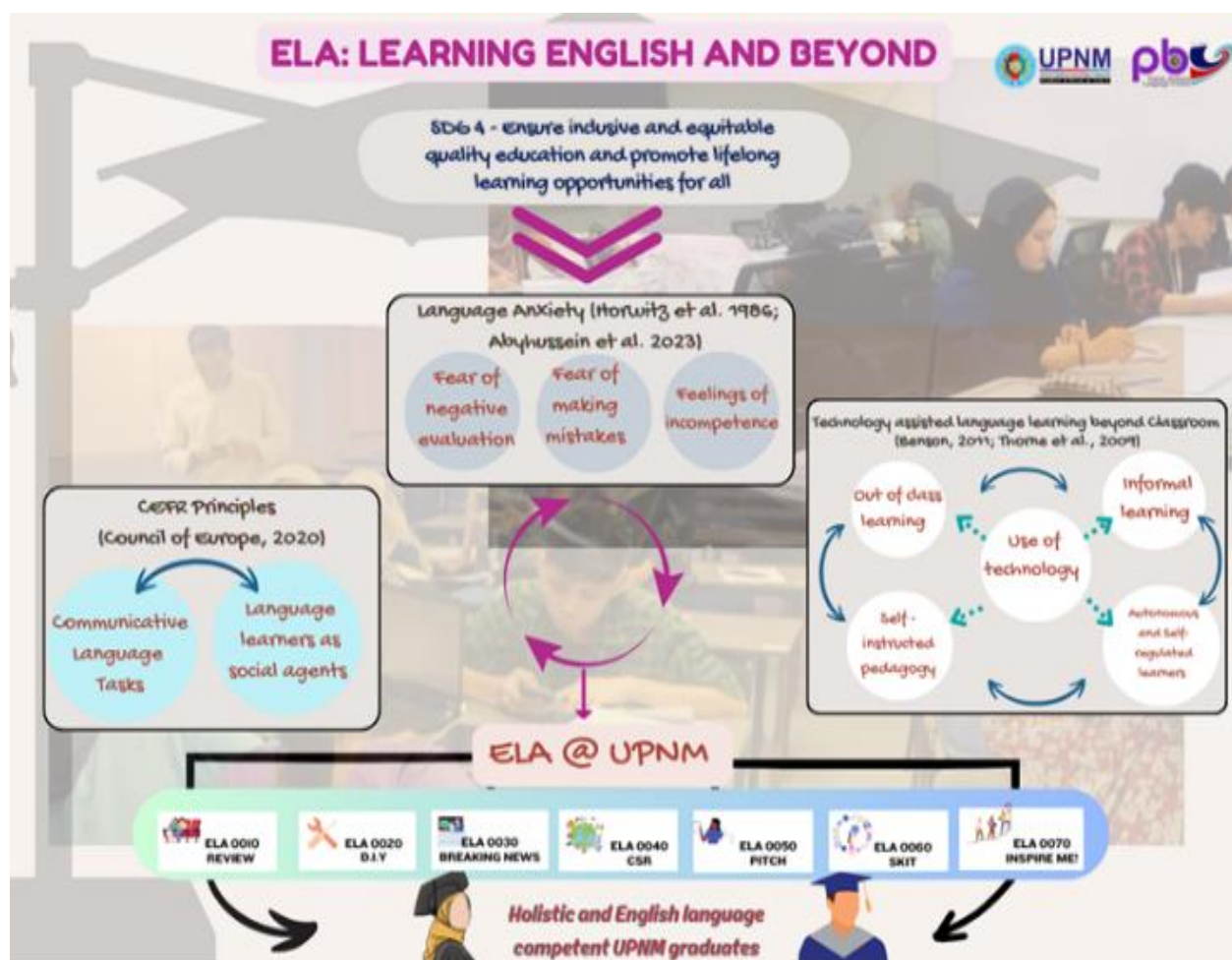
language experience, negative evaluation, and self-evaluation” (Mede and Karairmak, 2017, p. 119). One of the means to mitigate this challenge is by designing beyond classrooms language activities to complement formal learning (Benson, 2011). Thus, this research aims;

1. To assess the perceived benefits of participating in English language activities beyond classrooms among higher education students.
2. To examine the perceived benefits of students’ participation in NDUM’s homegrown English Language Activities (ELA) beyond classrooms as means to reduce their anxiety when utilising English language for academic purposes.

Product Description & Methodology

English Language Activities (ELA) is a pioneer project to assist students at higher education to have continuous engagement with the English Language outside formal classroom. ELA focusses on students’ communication and presentation skills by affording them with the opportunity to use English language while completing ELA tasks in an informal and non-threatening setting. The preparation of ELA is guided and informed primarily by the principles of CEFR that give emphasis to communicative language tasks and placement of language learners as social agents (Council of Europe, 2020). Additionally, constructs from Benson (2011) on language learning beyond classroom like out-of-class learning, informal learning, self-instructed pedagogy, and autonomous and self-regulated learners are also utilised. To further concretised the framework of ELA (see Figure 1), element of technology in language learning is also incorporated.

Figure 1 ELA Conceptual Framework



(Bakar et al., 2024)

The execution of ELA is carefully thought and planned after reviewing and comparing several best practices of language learning beyond classroom. ELA is the manifestation on the use of language beyond classroom as an extended space for learning and recognition of learners as social agents who are competent to regulate their



learning with sufficient guidance from facilitators as proposed by Reinders and Benson (2017). ELA embodies the approach of Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky,1978) that asserted the importance of social interactions and collaboration in a learning process as well as the approach of incidental learning through various language tasks with the overall aim to improve learners' proficiency and confidence in using the language.

The perimeters of ELA consist of dimensions of formality, informality, pedagogy, and locus of control. The integration of these four dimensions requires involvement mainly from learners and supported by facilitators. At the formality level, all learners at tertiary level are required to complete credited English language proficiency courses. These credited courses are to be conducted in classrooms and assessed either in a form of summative or formative to measure the attainment of learning outcomes. Due to limited hours of formal engagement with the English language during formal learning, it is essential to complement the process of language learning with informal activities to be completed beyond classrooms. The nature of informal learning itself is an effective means to reduce learners' anxiety level when using English. Learners are placed in groups with their peers, and they are given several language tasks to be completed within a flexible amount of time. In terms of pedagogy, each group is facilitated by a facilitator to offer guidance and support for learners while completing the assigned language tasks. Overall, ELA is self-directed and self-regulated by learners themselves.

This study employed a quantitative survey research design to examine the perceived benefits of students' participation in NDUM's homegrown English language activities (ELA) beyond classrooms and perceived usefulness of digital platforms as medium of interaction and to assess the current levels of anxiety experienced by higher education students when utilising English language for academic purposes. Using convenient sampling, the participants comprised of 86 undergraduate students from various academic programmes at NDUM. The participants were made up of 40 male and 46 female with a total of 63 students are civilians, and the remaining hold the roles as cadet and military reserve officers. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and demographic information such as gender, academic programme and students' role was collected for descriptive analysis.

Data were collected using a questionnaire adapted from Lee (2023); Jin et al. (2020) and Horwitz & Horwitz, 1986). The adapted questionnaire was validated through expert review. After further refinement to the items in the questionnaire, it went through a pilot testing phase to assess the questionnaire's clarity, validity, and reliability. Feedback was used to refine the wording of certain items, improve layout, and ensure content relevance. Cronbach's alpha for the revised scale was 0.89, indicating high internal consistency. The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms throughout Semester II 2024/2025. Clear instructions were provided, and informed consent was obtained electronically. Students were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Responses from the survey were descriptively analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 28.

FINDINGS

Findings for Research Objective 1

The findings reveal that more than 70% of the respondents agree that their participation in ELA has greatly improved confidence and motivation as they felt more empowered and enthusiastic about using English. Additionally, majority of the respondents appreciates that they were given the autonomy to design their responses to the ELA tasks and the opportunity to practice English outside formal classrooms (see Table 1).

Table 1 Means of students' perceptions on perceived benefits of participating in English language activities beyond classrooms (N=86)

Statement	Mean
I feel excited when I communicate in English with others while doing ELA	4.00
ELA helps me to have good relationships with my peers.	4.16
Completing out-of-classroom English language activities like ELA is enjoyable	3.92



Completing the ELA tasks makes me feel good and motivated to communicate in English	4.09
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These results indicate that ELA promotes a positive affective environment for learning. Participants felt excited, socially connected, and intrinsically motivated to engage in English. Notably, the item on peer relationships scored the highest ($M = 4.16$), suggesting that collaborative elements in ELA fostered social bonding and community building—critical aspects in reducing affective barriers in language learning. This aligns with Benson’s (2011) notion of informal, self-directed learning as more engaging and less intimidating.

Findings for Research Objective 2

The findings in Table 2 reveal that more than 60% of the respondents reported that they feel less anxious when participating in English conversations online. Almost 70% of the respondents expressed that the use of digital platforms to complete the ELA tasks help reduce their fear of making mistakes in English and easier to express themselves in English online than in in-person settings.

Table 2 Means of students’ perceptions on the perceived benefits of students’ participation in ELA as means to reduce language anxiety (N=86).

Statement	Mean
I become more aware of how to regulate my anxiety during speaking activities.	4.05
I feel less anxious when participating in English conversations online.	4.05
I feel confident when I have to post or record videos of myself speaking in English online as required by the ELA tasks .	4.02
My anxiety decreases with repeated chances to interact online in English as prescribed in ELA.	4.09
I find it easier to express myself in English online as prescribed by the ELA tasks than in person.	4.06
Digital platforms help reduce my fear of making mistakes.	4.08
Online peer support groups while completing the ELA tasks make me feel less anxious about using English.	4.13

The findings also strongly suggest that ELA activities, particularly those mediated through digital platforms, are effective in reducing learners’ English language anxiety. The highest mean score ($M = 4.13$) was for the item on peer support, which highlights the importance of social presence and emotional reassurance in reducing anxiety. This supports the Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) perspective, where online environments provide reduced pressure, increased reflection time, and less fear of negative evaluation, all of which are known contributors to language anxiety (Horwitz, 2010).

ELA, thus has successfully operationalised digital engagement as a safe, autonomous space for language practice outside formal settings.

Novelty and Potential commercialisation

ELA marks a significant contribution to the scholarship of CEFR as well as answering the calling of the Higher Education Ministry’s national agenda, which aspires for graduates to be proficient and confident when communicating in English language. This initiative presents a pedagogical innovation that addresses a critical, yet often overlooked, foreign language anxiety challenge among students of higher education in language learning. The innovation is grounded in several novel aspects. First, the explicit design of a framework that blends CEFR, learner autonomy, and digital tools sets it apart from traditional classroom-based learning. While much of the existing literature addresses anxiety in language learning, this study contributes a structured, replicable and scalable model that leverages technology-enhanced learning environments as a medium to reduce anxiety and encourage confidence. Second, ELA is uniquely designed to mitigate English language anxiety by providing low-stress, real-world contexts where students can engage with the language meaningfully using digital platform which provides emotional empowerment and support in terms of

managing and reducing students' language anxiety. Third, the language tasks of ELA reposition students as active and autonomous agents in their language development by affording them an avenue to design their responses and make choices about task execution. Fourth, ELA, which is pioneered within a military higher education institution, is contextually superior and unique as it is one of the first innovations in language learning that targets learners in high-stress, and highly disciplined environments.

The ELA framework holds significant commercial potential in both education technology and language teaching markets. As a way forward, ELA will be developed into a modular CEFR-Aligned Teaching Toolkit comprising CEFR-based ELA modules, task sheets, teacher guidelines, rubrics, student progress trackers, and anxiety monitoring tools. Additionally, this innovation will be transferred into a mobile application that offers interactive beyond-the-classroom language learning tasks, reflection journals, self-assessment features, and digital badges that are aligned with CEFR competencies. In addition, apart from providing a platform for students to enhance their communication skills and language confidence using English, the mobile app also integrates principles of mental wellness and self-efficacy, making it a powerful pedagogical tool for alleviating language anxiety.

To conclude, the empirical findings of this research highlight ELA as a learner-centred innovation that responds to the growing demand for more flexible, empathetic, and technology-enabled English language learning frameworks. Its novel integration of CEFR constructs and principles, emotional resilience, and digital adaptability creates significant opportunities for upscaling and commercialisation. The innovation is not only relevant in academic settings but also has the potential for cross-sectoral applications in lifelong learning, workforce training, and international education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is part of the outcomes of a self-funded grant supported by the Research Management Centre, National Defence University of Malaysia (Grant No. SF0154-UPNM/2024/SF/SSI/1).

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