Evaluating Students' Perceptions of Staged Instructional Framework in Identifying Persuasive Elements in Editorials

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000106

Received: 09 October 2026; Accepted: 14 October 2026; Published: 30 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Although persuasive writing is vital for academic and professional success, university graduates often struggle to analyse argumentative texts and detect underlying bias. Traditional frameworks frequently fail to scaffold the micro-skills required for critical reading, leaving a pedagogical gap between basic comprehension and rigorous analytical evaluation. This study investigates students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of a staged instructional framework in identifying persuasive elements in editorials, alongside their confidence in applying this framework. Using a mixed-methods survey approach, data were collected via a two-part questionnaire comprising closed and open-ended questions. This was administered to 63 undergraduates at Universiti Teknologi MARA Melaka. Although over 95% of respondents reported enhanced structural understanding, the findings highlight a persistent gap between self-assessed confidence and granular textual analysis. Nevertheless, 96.8% expressed an intention to apply the framework in future contexts. These insights underscore the need for adaptable, scaffolded instructional models that bridge surface-level reading and critical literacy.

Keywords: ESL literacy; persuasive writing; editorial analysis; instructional framework; critical reading; higher-order thinking skills

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

Persuasive writing is central to academic literacy and critical inquiry. Rather than an innate, solitary skill, writing is increasingly understood as a complex cognitive and social process requiring structured scaffolding. Existing literature underscores the multifaceted benefits of instruction in persuasive writing, extending beyond foundational literacy. Specifically, explicit and dialogic methods foster psychological advantages, such as enhanced self-efficacy and confidence (Falardeau et al., 2024). Cognitively, this instruction enables students to evaluate, synthesise, and integrate competing viewpoints into balanced discourse (Shi & Iordanou, 2025). Academically, explicit training in argumentative genres equips learners with the organisational and collaborative competencies necessary for higher-order academic tasks (Landrieu et al., 2023). Furthermore, as students construct logical arguments and anticipate counterarguments to influence reader perspectives, they develop vital critical thinking and communication skills (Kamaruddin & Othman, 2019).

However, these pedagogical benefits cannot be fully realised without addressing key instructional challenges. Many students struggle to identify and analyse persuasive elements in editorials—a task that demands an understanding of argument architecture, rhetorical devices, and evidence-based reasoning (Dornbrack & Dixon, 2014; Gleason, 1999; Boyle & Hindman, 2015; Lam et al., 2018). Learners frequently fail to recognise emotional appeals, counterarguments, and subtle rhetorical strategies, partly due to limited exposure to authentic persuasive texts (Shaver, 2013). This unfamiliarity further hinders their ability to distinguish between factual statements and opinionated assertions (Maab et al., 2024).

To mitigate these difficulties, instructional approaches often deconstruct persuasive texts into manageable components and offer structured practice through tools such as graphic organisers (Nussbaum & Schraw, 2007) or peer-review protocols (Graham & Perin, 2007). By implementing systematic frameworks, educators can better equip students to decode persuasive elements in editorials and other complex genres—a vital competency in higher education and professional practice. In the Malaysian context, graduates are expected to evaluate English-language media texts containing nuanced stances and implicit biases. Nevertheless, empirical evidence indicates that Malaysian tertiary students continue to experience challenges with analytical critical reading, often struggling to advance beyond surface-level comprehension to identify authorial intent and rhetorical nuances (Anuar & Sidhu, 2017).

Statement of Problem

Despite the importance of critical reading and persuasive communication in contemporary academic and professional spheres, university graduates frequently encounter barriers when engaging with authentic argumentative texts (Anuar & Sidhu, 2017). Although many tertiary English as a Second Language (ESL) students possess functional reading comprehension skills, they often face cognitive hurdles when evaluating stance or reading beyond explicit statements. This limitation typically stems from constrained rhetorical awareness and a limited capacity to systematically identify the linguistic mechanisms authors use to influence readers (He & AlSaqqaf, 2025). Consequently, difficulty in deconstructing complex arguments hinders students' ability to construct cohesive persuasive responses of their own (Lam et al., 2018). This challenge is widely reported across diverse ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where students struggle to progress from literal comprehension to evaluation and evidence-based analysis (Maab et al., 2024).

Within Malaysian higher education, this analytical shortfall is well documented. A diagnostic study by Rahim et al. (2024) identified a marked disparity between ESL undergraduates' self-perceived reading ability and their actual performance on authentic newspaper commentary. While participants reported high levels of confidence, their analytical execution was constrained: only one out of 51 students correctly identified the full set of supporting reasons within the selected editorial texts. This divergence between perceived competence and actual output frequently leads to self-doubt, prompting students to adopt neutral or non-committal stances during evaluative reading tasks. These findings align with broader research indicating that tertiary students exhibit varying readiness for critical reading, particularly regarding argument evaluation and relevance discrimination (Anuar & Sidhu, 2017).

Traditional instructional models contribute to these persistent difficulties. Classical frameworks, such as Toulmin's model of argumentation, emphasise structural logic (e.g., claims, grounds, warrants, backings, qualifiers, and rebuttals) but often lack the flexibility needed to decode dynamic social discourse. When applied to contemporary editorials, rigid structural models may fail to capture interpersonal metadiscourse features—such as hedges, boosters, and attitude markers—that authors use to establish stance and engage readers (Abdul Aziz & Ahmad, 2017). Furthermore, because secondary writing instruction in Malaysia predominantly emphasises descriptive and narrative modes, students often enter university with limited formal preparation in persuasive analysis (Abdul Aziz & Ahmad, 2017). Addressing these gaps calls for staged instructional frameworks tailored to non-academic media texts (Rahim et al., 2024).

Accordingly, there is a clear need for a scaffolded instructional framework designed to guide students through the systematic analysis of editorials, thereby managing cognitive load and encouraging analytical autonomy (He & AlSaqqaf, 2025). This study addresses these pedagogical needs by evaluating a staged metadiscourse framework. Specifically, it examines how structured text deconstruction supports critical reading capabilities, aligns performance with self-efficacy, and fosters evaluative confidence among Malaysian undergraduates engaging with authentic persuasive writing.

Objectives of the Study

To examine students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of staged instructional framework in supporting the identification of persuasive editorials.

To investigate students' confidence and intention to apply the framework strategies in future academic or real-life contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Editorials

In the contemporary landscape of media literacy, newspaper editorials occupy a singular strategic position, functioning as a sophisticated bridge between professional journalism and social advocacy. Unlike standard reportage, which ostensibly prioritises neutrality, editorials are intentionally designed to navigate the public sphere by articulating specific, value-laden viewpoints on societal exigencies. For learners of English as a Second Language (ESL), these texts represent a critical threshold for advanced literacy, requiring a transition from literal linguistic decoding to a profound understanding of how language constructs power. This mastery is increasingly urgent; as Rahim et al. (2024) observe, there is an obvious mismatch between the expectations of the global job market and the abilities of local graduates, particularly regarding the soft skills of communication and critical problem-solving within complex discursive activities.

Synthesising a comprehensive definition, newspaper editorials are authentic persuasive texts whose primary social purpose is to function as instruments designed to sway public opinion (Chen et al., 2026). Their inherent nature is fundamentally subjective, characterised by rhetorically biased stances rather than objective reporting. The high level of rhetorical sophistication found in these texts is often characterised by what Rahim et al. (2024) describe as a socio-cultural context bound by specific logical rules which necessitates specialised critical literacy skills for effective decoding. Without these skills, the subtle manoeuvres of persuasion remain opaque to the learner.

The "so what?" layer of this analysis suggests that shifting pedagogical focus from "decoding text" to "deconstructing bias" is transformative, evolving the student from a passive consumer to an analytical participant in social discourse. By interrogating the author's intent and the rhetorical mechanics of persuasion, the learner gains the agency required for 21st-century civic engagement. However, the theoretical nature of editorials presents significant practical challenges for ESL students, who often struggle to identify the underlying persuasive structures that facilitate such high-stakes communication, a dilemma explored through the empirical evidence in Section 2.2.

Past studies on the identification of persuasive elements in editorials

Empirical research is essential for identifying the specific cognitive and linguistic hurdles ESL and EFL learners face when engaging with argumentative prose. A critical tension exists between pedagogical perception and student performance. Singh et al. (2023) found that while ESL teachers' self-assessment of their higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) practices was at a high level (Mean = 4.01), they concurrently reported significant struggles with students' low proficiency and passive nature. Many studies have been done to investigate the learning of English as a second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) persuasive writing and text analysis, especially in terms of issues like (a) the structural organisation of arguments and (b) the identification of persuasive linguistic elements.

A seminal study by Abdul Aziz and Ahmad (2017) investigated persuasive writing performance using Toulmin's model of argumentation. Analysing the SPM writing corpus of 79 secondary school students in Malaysia, the researchers identified a stark mastery gap; while students were successful in applying primary elements such as claims, grounds, and warrants, they demonstrated a severe deficit in auxiliary elements, specifically rebuttals, qualifiers, and backings. From a strategic perspective, this deficit indicates a lack of intellectual humility and nuanced argumentation. Without auxiliary elements, students cannot engage in non-linear reasoning or acknowledge counter-positions, resulting in brittle, one-dimensional arguments that fail to meet professional standards. Further research by Lam et al. (2018) evaluated the effectiveness of a scaffolded blended learning approach among 72 Secondary 4 students in Hong Kong. Using pre/post-test essays and Edmodo postings, they found that the "Task strategy" group significantly outperformed the control group in

constructing antitheses and rebuttals. This suggests that staged cognitive templates are vastly superior to traditional direct instruction for mastering persuasive genres. These templates alleviate cognitive load, allowing students to navigate linguistic interference and internalise the structural demands of the genre. Collectively, these studies identify a need for a unified framework that synthesises structural logic with specific linguistic signposts.

Conceptual framework: The persuasive editorial identification framework

To bridge the "actual-perceived" gap in reading ability identified in literature, a sequential, staged model is required. Rahim et al. (2024) highlighted a staggering discrepancy in student performance: while 80.39% of students could correctly identify a text as argumentative, only a nominal 2.4% (representing just one student in the successful identification group) managed to correctly identify all the reasons or supporting data within the text. This framework integrates the structural rigor of Toulmin's model with metadiscourse analysis to resolve this failure in identifying the more nuanced auxiliary elements of an argument.

The framework is presented as a three-stage academic narrative:

Stage 1: Pre-reading (Cognitive Priming): This stage addresses the prior knowledge variable identified by Rahim et al. (2024) as a crucial factor in reading practices. Students activate cognitive schema and predict authorial stance through headline analysis, situating the text within its specific socio-cultural context before engagement begins.

Stage 2: During-reading (Linguistic Mapping): Here, students locate the author's interpersonal posture by identifying specific metadiscourse markers: boosters, hedges, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers. These markers serve as linguistic signposts that reveal the hidden argumentative architecture. For instance, attitude and engagement markers often signal the transition into the auxiliary elements (rebuttals and qualifiers) that Abdul Aziz and Ahmad (2017) found students typically miss.

Stage 3: Post-reading (Critical Evaluation): Students use guided analytical questions to determine overall text bias and objectivity. This stage moves the learner from comprehension to critical judgment, evaluating the degree of certainty (via hedges and boosters) and the validity of the claims.

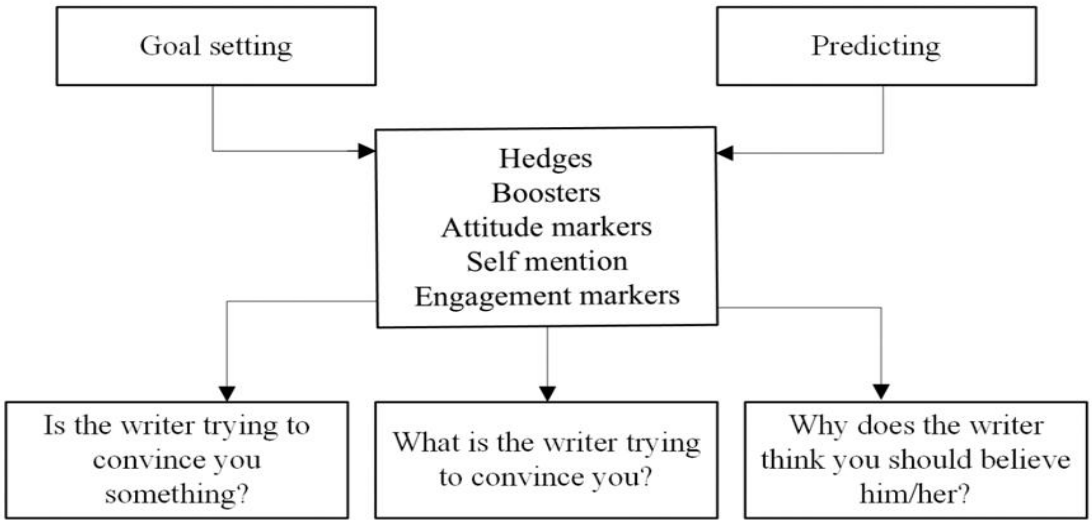

Figure 1: Persuasive editorial identification framework

This framework (Figure 1) is anchored to the findings of Rahim et al. (2024), serving as the concrete, creative, and innovative teaching method that Singh et al. (2023) conclude is currently missing from the pedagogical repertoire. By synthesising the social purpose of editorials with empirical scaffolding needs, the framework provides a viable pedagogical tool to resolve the discrepancy between a student's perceived competence and their actual performance in authentic text analysis. Through this structured approach, ESL learners are

empowered to move beyond simple decoding towards the high-level critical literacy required for professional and civic success.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive research design aimed at evaluating students' perceptions of the effectiveness of a framework meant for enhancing students' skills in identifying persuasive elements in editorials. Students' confidence and intention to apply the framework will also be evaluated. The design involves the following key components:

Intervention (lesson sessions): Students will participate in three lesson sessions where they will be introduced to and practice using the framework. These lessons will involve interactive activities, group discussions, and hands-on analysis of editorials.

Mixed-methods survey approach: To gather comprehensive insights, a mixed-methods survey design will be employed. Data will be collected using a questionnaire featuring a 5-point Likert scale to gather quantitative metrics, alongside open-ended questions to capture qualitative nuances of students' perceptions and experiences with the framework.

63 diploma level English as Second Learners (ESL) students in a Malaysian public university, specifically Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), participated in the study. The students were from various faculties, all of which include hotel and tourism management, communication and media studies, and academy of language studies. The students had a range of English language competencies, with some being more proficient in English than others.

Data Collection Methods

In-class activities

During the three lessons, students will participate in practical exercises designed to reinforce the framework. Their responses during these activities will be evaluated to measure their understanding and application of persuasive elements.

Questionnaire

Following the intervention, designed as a two-parter comprising of closed and open-ended queries, a questionnaire utilising a 5-point Likert scale will be administered to collect quantitative data on students' perceptions of the framework's usability, clarity, and overall effectiveness. The instrument will measure key variables, including self-reported confidence, conceptual understanding of persuasive techniques, and overall satisfaction with the instructional process.

Lesson structure (framework-based intervention)

Each of the three lessons will focus on different aspects of persuasive writing:

Lesson 1- Introduction to persuasive techniques: Students will learn how to recognise these elements in editorials.

Lesson 2- Deconstructing editorials: Students will apply the framework to break down real-world editorials, identifying key persuasive strategies.

Lesson 3- Practice and feedback: Students will engage in peer review and group discussions, applying the framework to various texts and receiving feedback.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis

The Likert-scale responses from the questionnaire will be analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage distributions) to assess overall trends in student feedback. The data will be visually represented using descriptive charts.

Qualitative analysis

The qualitative feedback was processed through a three-tier analysis:

Open coding: An initial inductive pass of the raw feedback to identify emergent concepts and recurring lexical choices regarding the framework's utility.

Axial categorisation: The systematic relating of initial codes to broader pedagogical categories, specifically linking student experiences to the pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading instructional stages.

Selective theme synthesis: The final integration of categories into four overarching themes that define the lived experience of the participants, providing a cohesive narrative that transcends individual anecdotes.

FINDINGS

To examine students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the instructional framework in enhancing their understanding of persuasive texts.

During one of the intervention activities, students were instructed about the features of persuasive texts, which include boosters, hedges, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers. Then, they were given a task to identify and analyse an online persuasive text from any local news website, such as Malaysiakini, Bernama, and New Straits Times, and submit it to the instructors for confirmation. At the end of the session, the students answered the survey questions. The following are the discussion of each question:

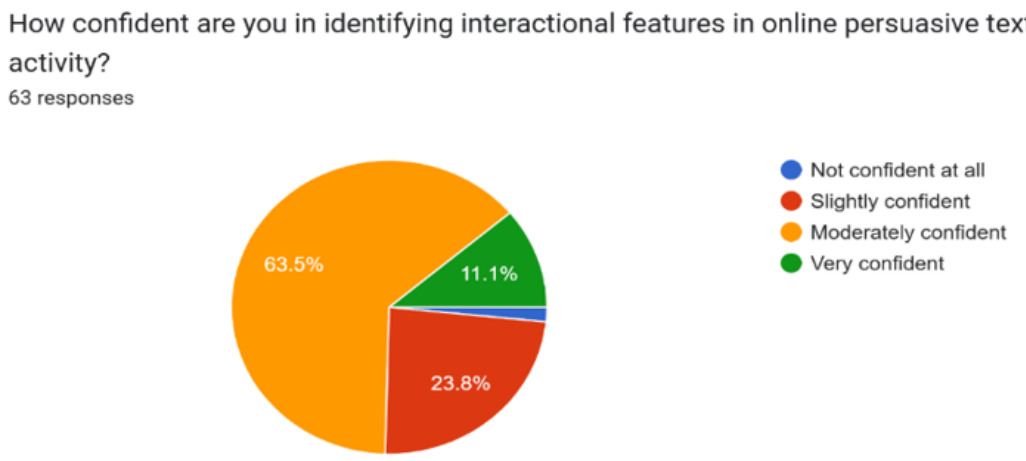

Chart 1: Students' confidence in identifying interactional features in online persuasive texts.

The above chart shows more than 60% of the students are moderately confident and 11% are very confident in identifying the interactional features in online persuasive texts after the intervention activity. However, 23% claim to have a slight confidence.

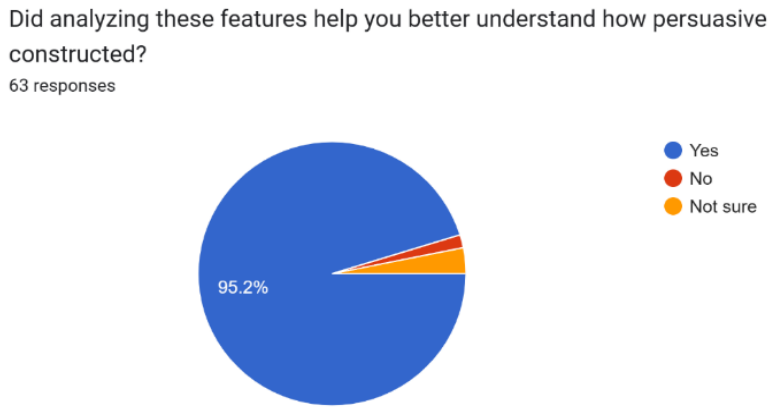

Chart 2: Students' understanding of persuasive arguments after analysing the features.

Based on the above chart, more than 95% of the respondents said they understand how persuasive arguments are constructed after analysing the features with instructors and independently. Less than 5% claimed otherwise.

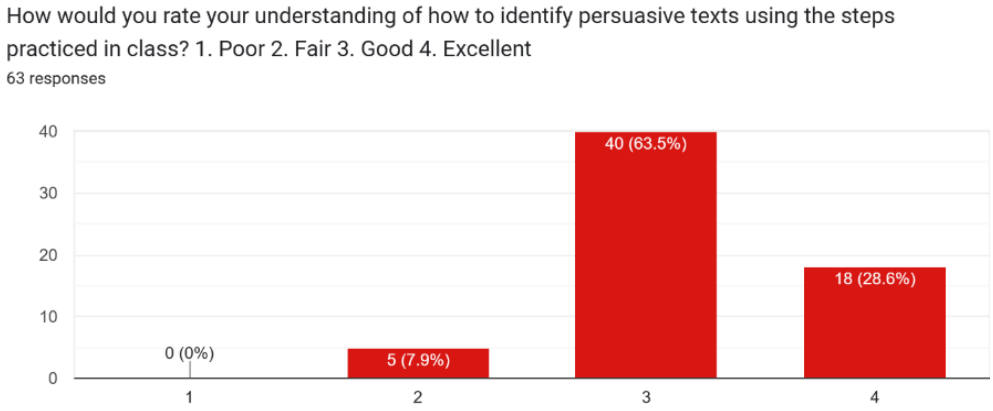

Chart 3: Students' understanding of how to identify persuasive texts using the steps practiced in class.

The above chart illustrates students' understanding of how to identify persuasive texts following the steps in the framework introduced in class. 63.5% of them claimed to have good understanding while 28.6% of them have excellent understanding on how to identify the persuasive text. However, very few, about 7.9% have a fair understanding on how to use the steps discussed.

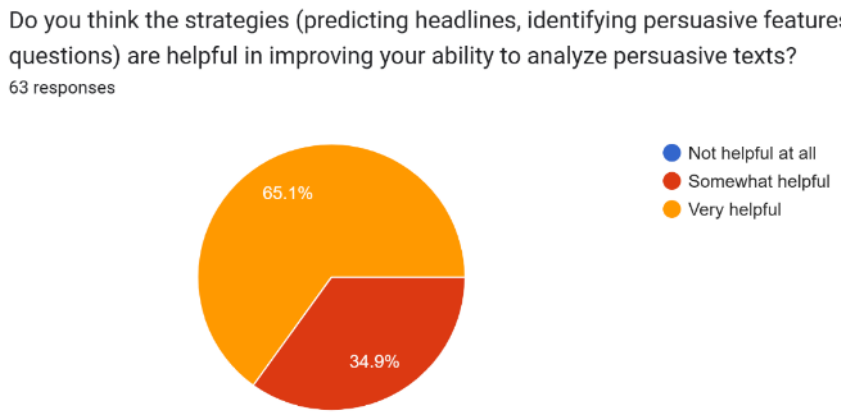

Chart 4: The strategies helpfulness in improving students' ability in analysing persuasive texts.

The chart above shows that 65% of respondents said that the strategies in the framework which include predicting headlines, identifying persuasive features, and answering questions are somewhat helpful in improving their ability to analyse persuasive text while 35% of them said very helpful. This portrays the respondents perceive the helpfulness of the framework used is good. Next, the following thematic synthesis provides a vital narrative layer to the quantitative data, illustrating the lived experience of students as they navigated the staged instructional framework. These findings reveal how the framework serves as more than a procedural guide, acting as a catalyst for a shift in critical disposition.

Student reflective responses were analysed through a systematic three-tier qualitative analysis procedure adapted from Corbin and Strauss (2008). First, an initial inductive pass of the raw feedback was conducted through open coding to identify emergent concepts and recurring lexical choices regarding the framework's utility (e.g., "speed reading," "identifying opinion," "workplace transfer," and "productive struggle"). Next, axial categorisation was performed to systematically relate initial codes to broader pedagogical categories, specifically linking student experiences across the pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading instructional stages. Finally, through selective theme synthesis, these categories were integrated into four overarching themes that defined the lived experience of the participants: (1) structural scaffolding and reading efficiency, (2) critical literacy and bias detection, (3) real-world transferability and vocational utility, and (4) desirable cognitive load and deliberate practice. Illustrative quotes were selected to provide empirical grounding for each theme (see Table 1).

Themes	**Core Analytical Focus**	**Student Qualitative Responses (Illustrative Quotes)**	**Perceived Impact**
Structural scaffolding and reading efficiency.	Systematic text navigation and cognitive unloading.	"It creates a very structural way of identifying what the author is trying to convey". "Amazing, it's definitely ease me to understand the article quickly without even read the whole passage".	High structural utility; accelerates text processing.
Critical literacy and bias detection.	Analytical discernment of text objectivity. and authorial intent	"I am now able to differentiate between factual articles or opinionated articles". "Helpful for spotting any biased articles in the daily news". "Helped me understand how language can influence or engage readers".	Fosters critical awareness and media literacy.
Real-world transferability and vocational utility.	Application of critical skills to workforce and civic life.	"Useful... especially if I'm going to work in a publishing company like newspaper company". "Helpful to imply it in real-life event".	Enhances professional readiness in the Malaysian media landscape.
Desirable cognitive load and deliberate practice.	Accommodation of conceptual difficulty as a learning driver.	"Quite hard." "Very hard but useful." "The difficulty is bearable."	High cognitive engagement: establishes "desirable difficulties" that promote deep learning.

Table 1: Thematic categorisation of student experiences with the staged scaffolding framework.

To investigate students' confidence and intention to apply the framework strategies in future academic or real-life contexts.

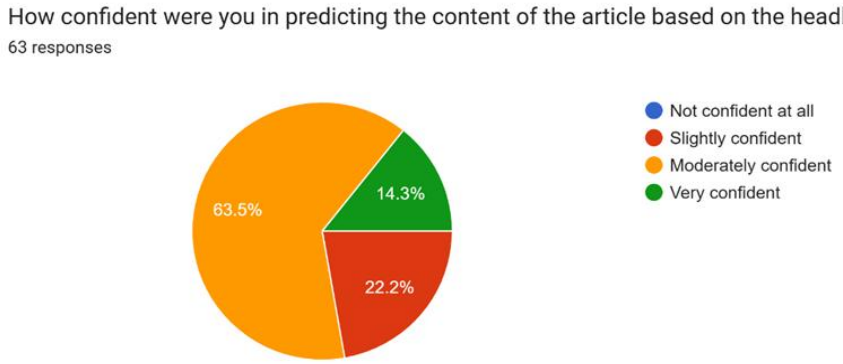

Chart 5: Confidence in predicting the content of an article.

Based on the above chart, 63.5% said they were moderately confident and 14.3% said they were very confident. Another 22.2% stated that they were slightly confident. However, none chose not confident at all.

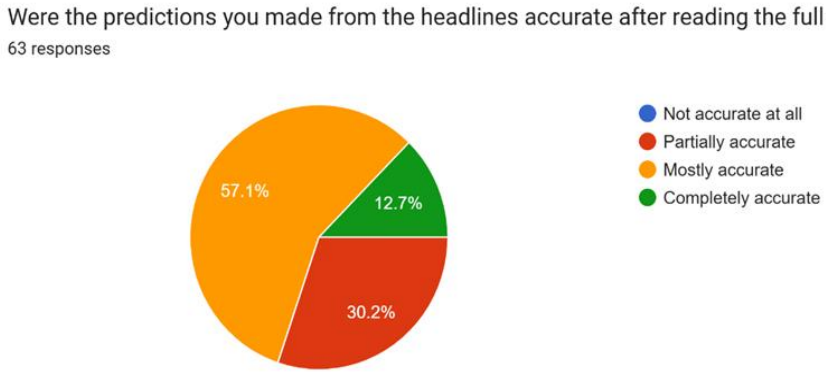

Chart 6: Accuracy of predictions

Based on the above chart, 57.1% of the respondents found their headlines predictions were accurate after reading the full texts. 30.2 % said partially accurate and 12% said it was completely accurate. None recorded not accurate at all.

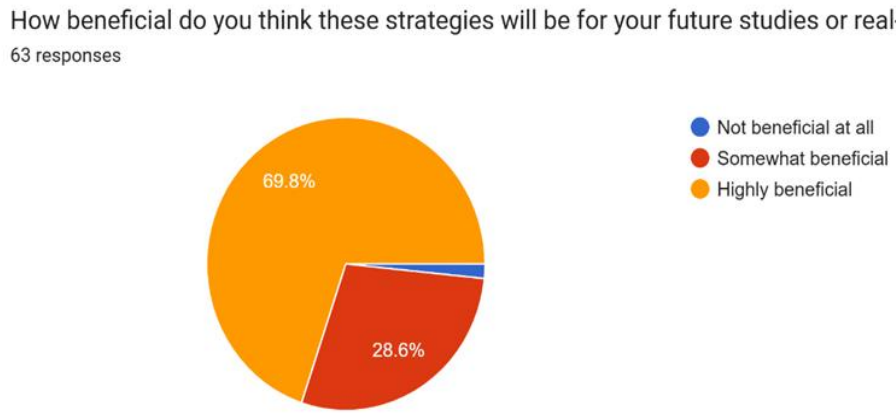

Chart 7: Benefits of the strategies

The above chart illustrates the benefits of the strategies for future studies or real-life situations. 69.8% of the respondents claimed that the strategies are highly beneficial while 28.6% said somewhat beneficial. However, 1.6% stated it was not beneficial at all.

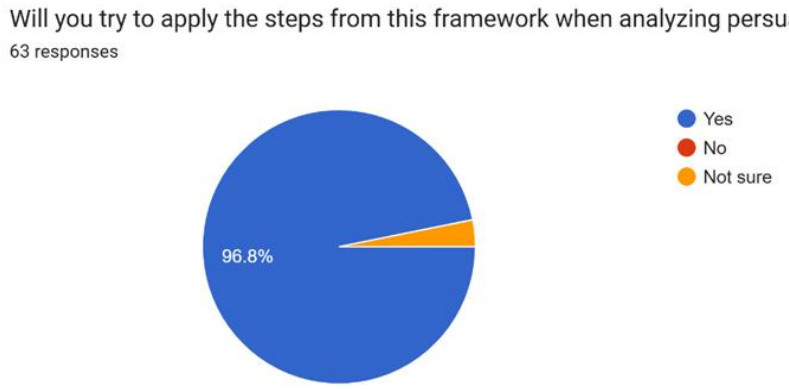

Chart 8: Possibility for future use

The above chart shows that almost all respondents said yes, they would try to apply the steps from this framework when analysing persuasive text in the future while only 2.3% stated not sure.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Findings and Discussions

Synthesis of quantitative results: Interactional and instructional efficacy

The quantitative data highlights a significant tension between student confidence and true conceptual mastery. Regarding interactional features, while a majority of students exhibited moderate confidence levels (exceeding 60%), a mere 11% reported high confidence in navigating complex argumentative tasks. From a pedagogical standpoint, this suggests that while initial scaffolding provides a baseline for engagement, a significant portion of the cohort remains in a state of "moderate" confidence, which often signifies a superficial adherence to frameworks without achieving genuine cognitive ownership. This lack of ownership prevents the transition from guided practice to autonomous mastery. The performance gap is further evidenced in the realm of argumentative literacy. While self-reported understanding was exceptionally high with over 95% of students claiming to understand persuasive arguments and 92.1% rating their comprehension of framework steps as "good to excellent", only 65% characterised these strategies as practically "helpful". This practical hesitation represents the first symptom of a pervasive performance discrepancy; high theoretical confidence fails to mitigate the functional difficulties students encounter when applying these skills to complex texts. Despite these immediate hurdles, student outlook remains strategically positive: 69.8% perceive HOTS integration as highly beneficial, and 96.8% indicate an intent to transfer these skills to future academic and professional domains.

Integration of qualitative themes

The efficacy of these findings is elucidated through four qualitative themes: structural scaffolding, critical literacy, real-world transfer, and desirable difficulties. Structural scaffolding, particularly through the Toulmin model, acts as a critical mechanism to address the desirable difficulties inherent in argumentative writing. As noted by Singh et al. (2023), argumentative composition is a taxing cognitive activity requiring the regulation of internal linguistic abilities alongside external rhetorical demands. Scaffolding converts these hurdles into manageable milestones. However, a critical nuance emerges; while scaffolds like i-THINK maps provide a clear roadmap, they can occasionally function as a "pedagogical straitjacket". The five-paragraph essay rigidity often instructed in classrooms may fail to prepare students for the non-linear, divergent arguments found in authentic newspaper texts (Rahim et al., 2024). Consequently, while scaffolding reduces the anxiety and inability to write identified by researchers such as Singh et al. (2023) and Ismail (2011), it must be flexible

enough to foster sustainable ability that is the capacity to solve real-world problems rather than merely regurgitating academic formulas.

Literature alignment and comparative analysis

The observed patterns of HOTS implementation are validated by the broader body of educational literature. The high premium placed on proper planning (M=4.38) in teacher self-assessments (Singh et al., 2023) underscores the necessity of intentional instructional design. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between actual and perceived abilities identified by Rahim et al. (2024) remains a primary concern. This disconnect aligns with the findings of Lam et al. (2018), who observed that students often struggle with the practical execution of higher-order tasks despite high self-perceived competence. Furthermore, the work of Boyle and Hindman (2015) reinforces the idea that pedagogical creativity is the primary driver in shifting students from passive knowledge recipients to active participants. While models provide the structure, the transition to informed citizenship requires a move beyond rote application towards the critical engagement emphasised in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025.

The performance gap: The "so what?" layer

The most critical finding of this synthesis is that high student confidence as evidenced by the >95% reported understanding, frequently masks deep-seated analytical failures. For instance, in the study by Rahim et al. (2024), despite the majority of students successfully identifying overall text types, only one student achieved a full score when tasked with the granular cognitive work of isolating specific argumentative reasons. This suggests that the current pedagogical focus may be producing superficially literate graduates who possess the vocabulary of critical thinking without the analytical rigor to apply it. If this gap is not addressed, Malaysian graduates will remain ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of social and industrial discourse, posing a direct threat to the national goal of fostering an informed and critical citizenry.

Directions for Future Research

Future research must move beyond single-district or single-institution studies to obtain a true picture of national trends. Multi-institutional studies will allow for a comparative analysis of HOTS mastery across diverse socio-economic and regional demographics in Malaysia. Besides, there is a pressing need for longitudinal studies that track the retention of argumentative frameworks. Research should follow students into industry placements to evaluate how classroom-based HOTS instruction transfers to real-world professional communication over time. Direct impact on writing compositions future trajectories should prioritise the assessment of actual ability in written output. By measuring objective writing performance rather than just perceived comprehension, researchers can identify specific points where structural scaffolding fails during the transition from reading to independent composition. On the other hand, digital gamified scaffolding integration exploration into ICT and gamification is necessary to address poor participation by passive students. Research should specifically examine how gamified digital scaffolding can mitigate the teacher anxiety identified in the Singh et al. (2023) study, fostering a more resilient and innovative teaching environment.

Conclusion Statement

Ultimately, bridging the chasm between perceived competence and actual analytical performance is the definitive challenge for modern ESL pedagogy; only by aligning student confidence with rigorous, evidence-based mastery can we ensure that 21st-century graduates are prepared for the demands of a globalised, critical society.

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