

Stepping into Someone's Shoes: Malaysian Readers' Perceptions of a Character-Chain Narrative Prototype for English for Specific Purposes

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ABSTRACT

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction in Malaysian higher education has often been described as disconnected from students' everyday bilingual language use. This study reports a descriptive survey of learner perceptions of a locally produced narrative-based ESP prototype developed as a diploma-level final-year project within a public higher education institution in Malaysia. The prototype comprises seven first-person short stories, each set in a distinct vocational field, and embeds 129 glossary entries across seven per-chapter glossaries linked through a character-chain design in which a secondary character in one story becomes the primary narrator of the next. A bilingual questionnaire was administered via Google Forms to a convenience sample of Malaysian readers, and 33 valid responses were retained for analysis. Descriptive statistics were computed for six perception constructs (comprehensibility, conversational authenticity, relatability, perceived realism, perceived vocabulary usefulness, and perceived overall effectiveness) and for story preference. Readers characterised the prototype as broadly comprehensible ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.74$), rated the combination of storytelling with English for Specific Purposes as positively effective ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.70$), and endorsed both relatability and situational realism at 100.0%. Three negative responses on Yes/No perception items came from Beginner English readers. The Information Technology story and the Business and Entrepreneurship story attracted the largest share of preference selections. The findings offer preliminary reader-perception evidence for locally produced narrative ESP materials in Malaysia and identify design considerations for lower-proficiency readers.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, narrative-based materials, learner perceptions, Malaysian ESL, character-chain design.

INTRODUCTION

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become a central concern of tertiary English language education in Malaysia. Recent policy alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) through the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025 and the Roadmap for English Language Education Reform 2015–2025 has directed tertiary providers to produce learners capable of independent professional discourse in English (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013; 2015). The operationalisation of this policy in classrooms has not been straightforward. Savski (2020) argues that the CEFR has been recontextualised in Malaysian language policy in ways that reveal broader ideological contrasts between global proficiency standards and local instructional realities. At the level of programme delivery, Ahmad, Sayadi, Danuri, and Ismail (2023) report that senior English educators at Malaysian technical and engineering universities describe ESP course management as a multi-dimensional balancing act carried out against a backdrop of persistent employer and public commentary on graduates' command of English. Recent work on undergraduate language practice adds a further layer: Mohammad Sauffi, Mohd Sani, and Senom (2026) document Malaysian university students drawing on translanguaging across formal, semi-formal, and informal interactions, driven partly by limited English knowledge and partly by identity preservation. Read together, these accounts suggest that Malaysian ESP instruction sits within a bilingual and multilingual reality that purely formal or transactional materials do not always reflect (Jain, Sidhu, & Lim, 2012).

One way of understanding this gap is to reconsider what ESP is being taught for. Hyland (2022) argues that ESP is not the acquisition of an isolated technical lexicon but participation in a specific communicative community, and that specialised language is therefore best treated as a socially situated practice. Basturkmen (2006) emphasises that ESP course design must respond to how learners actually use the target language, not to an idealised model of the profession. Nunan's (1988) learner-centred syllabus framework provides a further orientation: material that lowers the affective barrier and reflects learners' realities is more likely to sustain engagement than material that reproduces classroom formality. If ESP terminology is embedded within familiar, informal social contexts, learners may find it more accessible than the same terminology presented through corporate simulations or task-based drills.

Narrative pedagogy offers one such vehicle. Short stories have long been used in ESL and EFL settings as a means of embedding vocabulary within a coherent situational context, and reviews of the practice report gains in learner engagement, comprehension, and motivation (Pardede, 2011). Despite this potential, empirical evidence on narrative-based ESP materials in Malaysian tertiary settings remains thin. Existing Malaysian ESP scholarship has concentrated on needs analysis (Pang, Abd Majid, & Narayanan, 2025) and on the implementation of CEFR-aligned instruction (Jerome, Su Hie, Taibi, & Albert Abell, 2025). Comparatively little published work has examined how Malaysian tertiary learners perceive locally produced narrative ESP prototypes.

The present study addresses this gap through an evaluation of one such prototype. The prototype is a short-story collection developed as a final-year diploma project within a public higher education institution in Malaysia. The intended learners are Malaysian tertiary students already familiar with informal spoken English but with limited exposure to the specialised vocabulary of the seven vocational fields represented in the collection: Information Technology, Business and Entrepreneurship, Medical Health and Wellness, Culinary Arts, Creative Media and Design, Environmental Science, and Language and Communication. Section on Method describes the prototype and its terminology in greater detail.

This study reports a descriptive survey of learner perceptions of the prototype. It does not measure vocabulary acquisition or productive language gain. Rather, it asks how a small, mixed sample of Malaysian readers characterise the prototype across six perception constructs and how their story preferences pattern across the seven vocational fields. The following research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1. How do Malaysian readers perceive the comprehensibility of the prototype, and to what extent do they find the characters' dialogues similar to their own daily conversations?

RQ2. To what extent do readers perceive the characters' daily lives as relatable and as depicting real-life situations?

RQ3. How do readers perceive the usefulness of the narratives for understanding specific vocabulary, and how do they rate the perceived overall effectiveness of combining storytelling with ESP for their own learning?

RQ4. Which vocational-field narratives are most frequently preferred by readers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

English for specific purposes as situated social practice

The theoretical trajectory of ESP over the past two decades has moved from a text-and-lexicon orientation towards a view of specialised language as socially situated practice. Basturkmen (2006) argues that ESP course design must respond to how learners actually use the target language in their working and academic lives, not to an idealised representation of the profession. Belcher (2012) develops this argument further, describing ESP as instruction pitched simultaneously to learners' perceived present needs and to the imagined futures they hope to enter. Her framing is useful for the present study because it locates the value of ESP materials in what they mean to the learner, not only in what they contain.

Hyland (2022) offers the most recent restatement of this position, arguing that ESP is best understood as participation in a specific communicative community. On this account, the vocabulary of a profession is not a neutral inventory of terms but a means by which practitioners recognise one another, negotiate roles, and enact everyday interaction. Anthony (2018) consolidates the field in similar terms, treating needs, contexts, and communities as jointly constitutive of ESP. Harwood (2025) extends this line of argument to materials development specifically, distinguishing between studies that examine what materials contain, how learners and teachers actually use them, and how they are produced. Read together, these positions carry a materials-design consequence relevant to the present study. Materials that embed specialised vocabulary within recognisable social settings may support engagement with that vocabulary in ways that formal or transactional presentations do not.

Narrative and short stories in language teaching

Narrative has a long-established role in general ESL and EFL pedagogy. Erkaya (2005) documents four principal benefits of short stories in the EFL classroom: motivational, literary, cultural, and higher-order-thinking. Pardede (2011) argues from classroom-based observation that short stories support integrated skills work because they concentrate a great deal of linguistic and cultural information within a short, self-contained text. More recent empirical work extends this evidence base. Ocaña, García-Cañarte, and Rosales (2025) examine EFL vocabulary acquisition through short-story reading using learning analytics, and Zhou and Li (2025) report positive learner-perception outcomes among beginner readers after a two-month intervention using teacher-developed short stories. These affordances align with a broader tradition in second-language acquisition research that treats comprehensible, contextualised input as a precondition for meaningful uptake, and with the argument that emotionally engaging texts lower the affective barriers that otherwise constrain learner participation (Nunan, 1988).

Two features of this tradition matter for the present study. First, most work on short stories in ESL and EFL has been oriented towards general language proficiency rather than specialised vocabulary. Stories used are typically canonical literary texts or graded readers, and the pedagogical goal is broadly communicative rather than field-specific. Second, empirical work on how readers process short story collections, as distinct from individual stories, is rare. De Vooght and Nemegeer's (2021) study of readers' interpretation of an Italian short story collection is one of the few available comparators, and it does not address ESP content. Materials that were purpose-built to carry ESP content across multiple vocational fields, with explicit terminology mapping and structural links between chapters, appear uncommon in the literature reviewed here.

The Malaysian ESL/ESP context

Within Malaysia, ESP scholarship has concentrated on needs analysis and on the operational challenges of CEFR-aligned instruction rather than on the empirical evaluation of ESP materials. Pang, Abd Majid, and Narayanan (2025) conduct a PRISMA-guided systematic review of 21 recent studies on ESP needs analysis in higher education and report that the field remains dominated by needs identification, with an imbalance across disciplines and comparatively little work on subsequent stages of materials design and evaluation. This observation applies to needs-analysis research specifically rather than to the wider Malaysian ESP field. Jerome, Su Hie, Taibi, and Albert Abell (2025) approach the same policy environment from the learner side, reporting that 155 Malaysian public university students prioritise technology integration and job readiness over strict CEFR alignment when evaluating their English language education. Jain, Sidhu, and Lim (2012) situate these system-level observations at the undergraduate level, reporting favourable attitudes towards English as a second language alongside persistent difficulties when learners engage with formal or specialised registers. Adjacent work on literature-based instruction in Malaysian schools indicates that learners can respond positively to literary content when it aligns with their interests and prior knowledge (Atek, Hassan, Azmi, Azmi, & Alias, 2020), suggesting that the affordances of narrative are not culturally foreign to the Malaysian ESL context.

Two implications for the present study follow. First, empirical work on how Malaysian learners perceive materials designed in response to identified needs remains comparatively thin relative to the volume of needs-analysis work. Second, locally produced narrative ESP materials, developed within a Malaysian institution, are

not widely represented in the published record. The present study contributes to both threads by reporting a reader-perception baseline for one such prototype, using constructs derived from the study's own survey instrument. It does not claim to measure vocabulary acquisition, and it asks whether the readers it reached found the prototype comprehensible, relatable, authentic, and useful for engaging with specialised vocabulary.

METHOD

Research design

The study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive survey design to evaluate reader perceptions of the prototype under study. A descriptive survey was appropriate because the research questions concern how readers characterise a set of already-developed materials, rather than whether the materials produce measurable gains in vocabulary or productive language use. The design is consistent with the perception-oriented strand of materials evaluation, in which learner responses to piloted materials serve as one input among several into materials development (Tomlinson, 2011; Yang, 2020). Six perception constructs guided the questionnaire and the analysis: comprehensibility, conversational authenticity, relatability, perceived realism, perceived vocabulary usefulness, and perceived overall effectiveness of combining storytelling with ESP for learning. A seventh item captured story preference. Each construct was addressed by a single item, and no factor analysis or scale reliability estimation was attempted because the item set was small and heterogeneous in response format. Individual-item wording rather than latent construct labels should therefore be treated as the primary evidence for each finding.

The prototype

The prototype evaluated in this study is a locally produced narrative-based ESP short-story collection developed as a final-year diploma project within a public higher education institution in Malaysia. The intended readers are Malaysian tertiary students already familiar with informal spoken English but with limited exposure to the specialised registers of the vocational fields represented in the collection. The collection contains seven first-person narratives, each set in a distinct vocational field: Information Technology, Business and Entrepreneurship, Medical Health and Wellness, Culinary Arts, Creative Media and Design, Environmental Science, and Language and Communication. The fields were selected by the first author to span a broad range of professional life familiar to Malaysian young adults, covering technology, commerce, healthcare, hospitality, creative industries, environmental work, and language-focused careers.

Terminology and definitions were compiled and refined by the first author with informal input from four individuals who were students or interns in culinary arts, animation, English, and graphic design at the time. Terms for the remaining fields were sourced from social media, articles, and common experience. Terminology was not subjected to formal review by external subject specialists. The 129 figure reported here refers to the total number of glossary entries across the seven per-chapter glossaries, not to a controlled count of unique terms; overlap across chapters was minimised but was not systematically de-duplicated. Table 1 summarises the chapter structure and the number of glossary entries per field.

Table 1. Chapter structure of the prototype

Story	ESP field	Glossary entries
1	Information Technology	17
2	Business and Entrepreneurship	18
3	Medical Health and Wellness	22
4	Culinary Arts	19
5	Creative Media and Design	14
6	Environmental Science	22

7	Language and Communication	17
Total		129

The narratives are set in recognisably Malaysian locations and situations, including urban hotels, tertiary internships, and intercity travel. Character speech includes controlled code-switching consistent with the informal English of young Malaysian professionals. Within each chapter, ESP terms appear in bold within the running narrative and are defined in the per-chapter glossary that follows the story.

A short illustrative excerpt from the Information Technology chapter conveys the register and the in-text presentation of the ESP terms:

Sure... Ask me, 'Why can't I **access** this?' or 'How do I **download** that?' or even, 'How can I **upload** this there?' as if I know.

The corresponding glossary presents each highlighted term with its part of speech and a plain-English definition, for example:

Download [Verb]: *copy (data) from one computer system to another, typically over the Internet.*

The chapters are linked through a character-chain design in which a secondary character in one story becomes the primary narrator of the next. This design is a feature of the prototype rather than a claim of the present study; the survey did not include an item measuring reader response to inter-chapter continuity, and the design's specific contribution to reader engagement therefore remains untested here.

Participants

The survey used convenience sampling with no eligibility screening beyond willingness to read the prototype and complete the questionnaire. A mixed sample of tertiary students, working adults, and other adult readers was retained rather than a tertiary-only sample because the prototype was designed for general adult readers with limited exposure to specialised registers, and the wider sample allowed a preliminary check on whether the material generalised beyond the primary intended readership. A total of 36 responses were received during the survey window. Three responses were excluded from the analytic sample: two responses from participants under the age of 18 and one response from a supervisor associated with the project, whose inclusion would have compromised the independence of the perception data. The final analytic sample was $n = 33$. Table 2 summarises the sample.

Table 2. Sample characteristics ($n = 33$)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age group	18–23	21	63.6
	31–40	2	6.1
	41–50	8	24.2
	50 and above	2	6.1
Profession	Public higher education student (IPTA)	16	48.5
	Government sector worker	10	30.3
	Freelancer	2	6.1
	Private sector worker	2	6.1
	Secondary school student	2	6.1
	Private higher education student (IPTS)	1	3.0

English proficiency	Advanced	3	9.1
	Intermediate	24	72.7
	Beginner	6	18.2

The sample is skewed towards young adults, particularly public higher education students, and towards self-reported intermediate English. Interpretive caution is therefore warranted for any subgroup contrast, especially at the extremes of the proficiency distribution (Advanced $n = 3$; Beginner $n = 6$). The age brackets used in the questionnaire followed the categorisation offered by the survey instrument and did not include a 24–30 bracket; readers aged 24 to 30 were absent from the responses received.

Instrument

A bilingual questionnaire (English and Bahasa Malaysia) was developed for this study and delivered via Google Forms. Item wording in both languages was drafted by the first author and reviewed for equivalence by the second author. The instrument was not subjected to a formal pilot or to independent expert review. It contained twelve items in three sections. The first four items collected respondent information: Q1 timestamp (recorded automatically), Q2 name (used for de-duplication and then anonymised at analysis), Q3 age group (five closed categories: 17 and below; 18–23; 31–40; 41–50; 50 and above), and Q4 current profession (six closed categories with a free-text alternative: public higher education student, private higher education student, secondary school student, government sector worker, private sector worker, freelancer). Q5 asked about general preference for learning English through reading stories (Yes/No). The remaining substantive items are mapped to constructs in Table 3.

Table 3. Item-to-construct map for the substantive survey items

Item	Construct	Format
Q5. Do you like learning English through reading stories?	General learning preference	Yes/No
Q6. Were the stories easy to understand?	Perceived comprehensibility	5-point scale
Q7. Were the characters' dialogues similar to your daily conversations?	Perceived similarity of dialogue to daily conversation	Yes/No
Q8. Which short story did you like best? (multi-select)	Story preference	Multi-select
Q9. Were you able to relate to the daily lives of the characters?	Relatability	Yes/No
Q10. Do you think the stories depict real-life situations?	Perceived realism	Yes/No
Q11. Did the stories help you understand specific vocabulary or terms?	Perceived vocabulary usefulness	Yes/No
Q12. How effective is the combination of storytelling and ESP for your learning?	Perceived overall effectiveness	5-point scale

The 5-point scales used numerical anchors from 1 to 5, with the extreme anchors labelled "very hard" (1) and "very easy" (5) for Q6, and "not effective" (1) and "very effective" (5) for Q12. The intermediate points (2, 3, 4) were not verbally labelled in the questionnaire. Item Q7 measures perceived resemblance of character dialogue to the respondent's daily conversation. It does not measure professional or vocational authenticity, and results for this item are interpreted only within its stated wording.

Procedure

Recruitment used a mixed digital convenience approach. Participants were reached through WhatsApp contact groups, tertiary-institution networks, and public social media posts. Prospective readers received a link to the prototype in digital form and, once they had read it, a link to the Google Form. The questionnaire remained open

from 13 to 18 January 2026. Completion was voluntary and no incentive was offered. Participants were expected to have read all seven chapters before completing the questionnaire; the study did not track reading time or verify completion of the reading, so story preferences may partly reflect variation in reader engagement across the collection. The introductory page of the form stated the purpose of the study, informed participants that responses would be used in aggregate for a research report, and obtained their consent to proceed. Participants were assured of complete anonymity and that all data would be treated as confidential. Responses were de-duplicated by inspection of names and timestamps; no duplicate submissions were identified. The Q2 name field was used only for this de-duplication and for the exclusions described above, and it was then removed before analysis.

Analytic strategy

Responses were exported from Google Forms into Microsoft Excel and cleaned by removing the excluded responses, standardising response labels, and coding multi-select responses into per-story indicator variables. No missing values were present on the substantive perception items. Descriptive statistics were computed using Python (openpyxl and the standard statistics module): frequencies and percentages for categorical items, and mean, median, and standard deviation for the two 5-point scale items. Story preference is reported with the respondent ($n = 33$) as the denominator. A percentage indicates the proportion of respondents who selected a given story; figures sum to more than 100% because the item permitted multiple selections. Subgroup comparisons by English proficiency, age group, and profession are reported descriptively without inferential testing because subgroup sizes are too small to support inference. Where a subgroup n falls below five, comparisons are noted but not interpreted.

RESULTS

Perceived comprehensibility and similarity of dialogue to daily conversation (RQ1)

Readers characterised the prototype as broadly comprehensible. On the five-point comprehension scale (Q6), the sample mean was $M = 4.36$ ($SD = 0.74$, $Md = 5$). No respondent selected the two lower points on the scale. Seventeen respondents (51.5%) rated the stories very easy to understand, 11 (33.3%) rated them easy, and 5 (15.2%) selected the numerical midpoint. The distribution is skewed towards the upper end of the scale but retains a non-negligible group at the midpoint.

The dialogue-similarity item (Q7) produced a similarly high-endorsement pattern. Thirty-two respondents (97.0%) reported that the characters' dialogues were similar to their own daily conversations; one respondent (3.0%) did not. This item measures perceived similarity to daily conversation and does not evidence vocational or professional authenticity.

Perceived relatability and perceived realism (RQ2)

The two social-authenticity items produced complete positive endorsement. All 33 respondents (100.0%) agreed that they could relate to the daily lives of the characters (Q9), and all 33 (100.0%) agreed that the stories depicted real-life situations (Q10). Because Yes/No items compress within-category variation, these unanimous responses should be read as indicating that no respondent was willing to reject either the relatability or the realism of the material, rather than as evidence of uniformly strong endorsement.

Perceived vocabulary usefulness and perceived overall effectiveness (RQ3)

On Q11, 32 respondents (97.0%) reported that the stories helped them understand specific vocabulary or terms; one respondent (3.0%) did not. This response is discussed alongside two other negative responses in the negative responses subsection below.

The perceived overall effectiveness of combining storytelling with ESP for learning (Q12) was rated on a five-point scale from "not effective" (1) to "very effective" (5). The sample mean was $M = 4.36$ ($SD = 0.70$, $Md = 4$). No respondent selected either of the two lower points. Sixteen respondents (48.5%) rated the combination very effective, 13 (39.4%) rated it effective, and 4 (12.1%) selected the numerical midpoint.

Table 4 summarises the descriptive statistics for the two scale items across the whole sample and across English-proficiency subgroups.

Table 4. Comprehensibility and effectiveness by English proficiency (n = 33)

Group	n	Comprehensibility M (SD)	Effectiveness M (SD)
Advanced	3	4.33 (1.15)	4.67 (0.58)
Intermediate	24	4.42 (0.72)	4.38 (0.71)
Beginner	6	4.17 (0.75)	4.17 (0.75)
Total	33	4.36 (0.74)	4.36 (0.70)

The subgroup means differ only modestly. Advanced readers reported the highest perceived effectiveness ($M = 4.67$) and Beginner readers the lowest ($M = 4.17$). The subgroup ns are too small to support inferential testing, and the overlap in standard deviations indicates substantial within-group variation. Overall subgroup patterns are reported descriptively only.

Story preference (RQ4)

Respondents were asked to identify their favourite story or stories from among the seven chapters, with multiple selections permitted (Q8). A total of 58 selections were cast across 33 respondents. Fourteen respondents (42.4%) selected more than one favourite; 19 (57.6%) selected only one. Table 5 reports the number and percentage of respondents who selected each story.

Table 5. Story preference (n = 33)

Story (ESP field)	Respondents selecting	% of respondents
Information Technology	13	39.4
Business and Entrepreneurship	10	30.3
Medical Health and Wellness	9	27.3
Environmental Science	9	27.3
Creative Media and Design	9	27.3
Culinary Arts	5	15.2
Language and Communication	3	9.1

Note. Percentages sum to more than 100% because respondents could select more than one story.

The Information Technology story received the largest share of preference selections (39.4%), followed by Business and Entrepreneurship (30.3%). A cluster of three stories, Medical Health and Wellness, Environmental Science, and Creative Media and Design, tied at 27.3%. The Culinary Arts (15.2%) and Language and Communication (9.1%) stories were selected less frequently.

Subgroup patterns on the scale items

Descriptive subgroup patterns for the two 5-point scale items are reported here separately from story preference, because they do not bear directly on RQ4. Public higher education students ($n = 16$) returned the highest mean effectiveness ($M = 4.50$) and comprehensibility ($M = 4.50$) scores of any professional subgroup. Government sector workers ($n = 10$) reported lower mean scores on both items ($M = 4.00$ and $M = 4.20$ respectively). Both means remain in the positive half of the scale. Age-group means for the two scale items were similar in the middle brackets (18–23 and 41–50). The two smallest brackets (31–40, $n = 2$; 50 and above, $n = 2$) are too small to interpret.

Negative responses

Three respondents produced at least one negative Yes/No response on the perception items. All three self-reported Beginner English proficiency. Their profiles and responses are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6. Negative responses (n = 3)

Case	Age	Profession	English level	Item on which "No" was returned	Comp.	Eff.
A	18–23	Freelancer	Beginner	Q11 perceived vocabulary usefulness	5	3
B	41–50	Government sector worker	Beginner	Q5 general preference for learning through stories	4	4
C	41–50	Government sector worker	Beginner	Q7 similarity of dialogue to daily conversation	5	5

The negative responses were spread across three different items rather than concentrated on a single construct. Each respondent also returned positive scale ratings elsewhere: Cases A and C rated comprehension at 5, and Case C rated overall effectiveness at 5. The Case B response concerns a general preference for learning through stories rather than a specific feature of the prototype.

DISCUSSION

Reader-perception pattern in relation to ESP as social practice

Across the three social-authenticity items in the questionnaire (Q7 dialogue similarity, Q9 relatability, Q10 realism), the prototype was received positively by nearly all respondents. All 33 respondents endorsed both the relatability of the characters' lives and the realism of the depicted situations, and 32 (97.0%) reported that the dialogues resembled their own everyday conversations. This pattern is consistent with theoretical positions that treat ESP as a socially situated practice rather than as the transmission of a discipline-specific lexicon (Basturkmen, 2006; Hyland, 2022). Belcher's (2012) argument that ESP is best pitched to learners' own accounts of what the language is for maps onto this reception pattern: the prototype's readers appear to have engaged with the specialised registers of the seven fields through the more familiar affordance of storytelling.

Two limits of this interpretation apply. First, the perception constructs measured here do not extend to vocabulary retention, productive use, or communicative competence, and no such extension is intended. Second, the Yes/No format of Q9 and Q10 compresses variation, so the unanimous positive responses indicate the absence of stated disagreement rather than uniformly strong endorsement. What the pattern does show is that the readers reached in this small sample did not reject the socially situated framing of ESP as incongruous or artificial. Given the observation that Malaysian ESP instruction sits within a bilingual and multilingual reality that formal materials do not always reflect (Ahmad et al., 2023; Mohammad Sauffi et al., 2026), even a small descriptive baseline of this shape is a useful piece of evidence.

Variation in beginner responses

The negative responses reported above concern three different items and do not converge on a single construct or a single feature of the prototype. Case A rated comprehensibility at 5 and reported that the material did not help with vocabulary. Case B expressed a general dispreference for learning through stories, which is not a judgement on this specific material. Case C rated both scale items at 5 and reported that the dialogues did not resemble their daily conversations. Because these three responses concern different items, they do not identify a specific feature of the prototype, such as the informal register or code-switching, as the source of difficulty. Any such identification would require items that asked about those features directly. The observation to retain is that variation in perception across Beginner respondents warrants targeted investigation in future work with a larger Beginner subsample, including items designed to probe proficiency-specific scaffolding needs.

Story preference

The Information Technology story and the Business and Entrepreneurship story attracted the largest shares of preference selections (39.4% and 30.3% respectively), followed by a cluster of three stories at 27.3%. The Culinary Arts and Language and Communication stories were selected least frequently. Fourteen respondents (42.4%) selected more than one favourite; the remaining nineteen (57.6%) selected only one, so multi-selection was common but not dominant. Three plausible explanations for the top-ranked position of the Information Technology story warrant consideration. It is the opening chapter of the collection, and recent experimental evidence on text-position effects has shown that earlier-encountered text tends to receive more attention and to be more readily recalled (Schüler, Kammerer, & Becker, 2025). Its specialised vocabulary is arguably closer to daily non-professional speech than the vocabulary of some other chapters. Its narrative appeal, independent of vocabulary, may also have been higher. The survey did not measure prior familiarity with any of the vocational fields, so familiarity remains a possible explanation but not one the present data can confirm.

The two least-selected stories, Culinary Arts and Language and Communication, have specialised vocabulary that is either domain-restricted (kitchen terminology) or metalinguistic (terminology about language itself). This may reduce reader identification even when the narrative situation remains accessible, though the survey cannot separate this effect from narrative-appeal differences. What can be said is that story preference varied across the seven chapters and that the pattern is compatible with, though not evidence for, a role of vocabulary familiarity in reader response.

Implications for locally produced ESP materials development in Malaysia

Three implications for the design and evaluation of Malaysian ESP materials follow. First, the perception pattern reported here supports continued investment in locally produced narrative ESP prototypes as a complement to task-based or corpus-driven ESP materials. Malaysian ESP research on materials evaluation, as opposed to needs identification, remains comparatively thin (Pang, Abd Majid, & Narayanan, 2025), and small perception studies of the present type can help populate that stage. Second, the first-person voice used in this prototype was received positively across a diverse set of vocational fields within a single collection. The character-chain design, in which a secondary character in one story becomes the primary narrator of the next, was not directly evaluated by any survey item; its specific contribution to reader engagement cannot be inferred from the present data and remains a candidate for future investigation. Third, variation across Beginner respondents suggests that a single informal register may not serve all proficiency bands equally. Future narrative ESP materials may benefit from proficiency-differentiated variants or from paratextual scaffolding aimed at lower-proficiency readers, though the specific mechanism at issue for Beginner readers of this prototype requires more targeted items than the present instrument provided.

CONCLUSION

This study reported a descriptive survey of Malaysian reader perceptions of a locally produced narrative-based ESP prototype. Across 33 respondents, the prototype was received as comprehensible, relatable, and situationally realistic, and its combination of storytelling with ESP was rated positively for perceived usefulness and perceived overall effectiveness. Story preference varied across the seven chapters, with the Information Technology and Business and Entrepreneurship stories selected most frequently. Variation across Beginner respondents suggests that a single informal register may not serve all proficiency bands equally. The findings offer preliminary reader-perception evidence for locally produced narrative ESP materials in Malaysia and identify design considerations for lower-proficiency readers.

Four limitations bound this contribution. First, the design is a single post-reading survey with no pre-test, no comparison group, and no measure of subsequent language use. Second, the sample of 33 respondents was assembled by convenience through digital channels and is skewed towards young adults, particularly public higher education students, and towards self-reported intermediate English; the Beginner and Advanced subgroups were too small to support inference. Third, the instrument was purpose-built for the study, was delivered bilingually, and was not subjected to a formal reliability, validity, or piloting procedure. Fourth, the

Yes/No format of five of the eight substantive items compresses within-category variation and produces ceiling effects that may exaggerate the impression of unanimous positive endorsement. In addition, the survey did not measure reader response to the character-chain design or to prior familiarity with the seven vocational fields.

Four directions for further research follow. First, a pre-test and post-test design with a matched non-narrative comparison text would allow a vocabulary-acquisition claim to be evaluated. Second, replication with larger, stratified samples using a piloted, expert-reviewed instrument would permit the Beginner-response pattern to be tested rather than only observed. Third, the character-chain design should be assessed with items that ask about it directly, so that its specific contribution to reader engagement can be evaluated independently of overall reception. Fourth, digital or interactive delivery of the collection, including audio narration or embedded glossary lookup, would allow examination of whether the reception pattern reported here changes when readers can interact with the material rather than only read it. Future iterations of the prototype should also subject the vocational terminology and glossary definitions to formal review by relevant subject-matter experts. Taken together, these directions position the present study as a first, deliberately modest, step in a longer programme of research on narrative-based ESP materials for Malaysian learners.

Declaration Of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this article.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used generative artificial intelligence tools to support language editing and structural refinement. All content generated with the assistance of these tools was reviewed, verified, and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and intellectual content of the final manuscript. The empirical data, the analytical decisions, the interpretation of findings, and the theoretical framing are the authors' own.

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