

Testing Lexical Competence Through Cultural Conceptualisations: A Methodological Framework in Analysing Nativised Lexical Items

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ABSTRACT

Research on lexical competence has traditionally focused on dimensions such as vocabulary size, depth, and use of word knowledge, with limited attention to the role of cultural knowledge in shaping lexical meaning. This paper addresses this gap by proposing a novel methodological framework, the Word Association-Interpretation (WAI) framework for investigating cultural conceptualisations embedded in nativised lexical items. In this study, participants were presented with a list of 11 nativised English lexemes in Malaysian English (ME) and were asked to produce spontaneous word associations while elaborating on their understanding of the lexemes as well as their practical use in interactions within the Malaysian speech community. The analysis employs Nvivo 14 to identify patterns and map responses to these constructs, offering insights into the dynamic interplay between language and culture. Responses from the 13 participants revealed underlying cultural schemas and cultural categories that reflect shared cultural knowledge within the community. By analysing the patterns that emerged from these associations, the framework demonstrates how processes of semantic shift and lexical nativisation give rise to culturally grounded meanings, particularly in multilingual settings where English has undergone local adaptation. The study argues that such meanings represent an additional dimension of lexical competence, extending beyond conventional measures of vocabulary knowledge. The proposed model therefore expands current understandings of lexical competence by integrating cultural conceptualisations as a measurable component of lexical knowledge.

Keywords: lexical competence, cultural conceptualisations, nativised English lexemes in Malaysian English (ME), the Word Association-Interpretation (WAI) framework

INTRODUCTION

The study of lexical competence has traditionally focused on quantitative aspects such as vocabulary size, collocational knowledge, and grammatical accuracy, often overlooking the cultural dimensions that shape word meaning and usage (Meara, 1996; Mendiñeta & Caro, 2017). While these conventional approaches provide valuable insights to language proficiency, they fail to account for the rich cultural conceptualisations that underlie lexical items, particularly in New Englishes where English has been nativised to reflect local social-cultural contexts (Mohd Nasir, 2021). This gap becomes especially apparent in postcolonial and multilingual settings, where English lexemes often acquire culturally specific meanings that diverge from their original semantic fields (Kachru & Smith, 2008).

Recent works in Cultural Linguistics has demonstrated that language is deeply intertwined with cultural schemas and categories, which influence how speakers conceptualise and interpret words (Sharifian, 2017). However, integrating these insights into lexical competence research remains underexplored. Although traditional word association studies are known to be useful for examining semantic networks that typically employ stimulus words from standard varieties of English, it misses the cultural nuances present in nativised lexemes (Mohd Nasir, 2025). This limitation calls for a methodological shift that incorporates culturally salient lexemes as stimuli and interprets responses through the lens of cultural conceptualisations.

Thus, the study introduces a Word Association-Interpretation (WAI) method as a research approach for identifying cultural conceptualisations embedded in lexical items. Unlike conventional approaches, this WAI

framework uses lexemes from local English varieties, such as Malaysian English, to elicit associations that reflect cultural knowledge. These associations are then analysed to identify recurring patterns, revealing how semantic shifts and nativisation processes contribute to meaning construction. By doing so, the framework expands the scope of lexical competence to include cultural awareness as a key dimension, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how speakers negotiate meaning in diverse linguistic contexts.

The proposed framework contributes to existing research in three significant ways. First, it bridges the gap between Cultural Linguistics and lexical studies, demonstrating how cultural conceptualisations influence word meaning in New Englishes (Lactic, 2025). Second, it provides a methodological tool for examining nativised lexemes, which are often excluded from mainstream lexical competence assessments. Third, it challenges the assumption that lexical proficiency is solely a matter of formal accuracy by highlighting the role cultural fluency in effective communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lexical Competence and Cultural Conceptualisations

The study of lexical competence has evolved significantly from its early focus on vocabulary size and word recognition to encompass more nuanced dimensions of word knowledge. Traditional models, such as those proposed by Nation, emphasize quantitative aspects including breadth (number of words known) and depth (richness word knowledge) (Noro, 2002). While these models provide a foundational understanding of lexical acquisition, they often overlook the social-cultural dimensions that shape how words are understood and used in different linguistic communities.

Nevertheless, empirical research in the field of New Englishes has challenged this narrow view by demonstrating how English lexemes undergo semantic shifts and acquire culturally specific meanings in multilingual contexts (Kachru, 2006; Mohd Nasir, 2021). For instance, in Malaysian English (ME), words like “action” (meaning to show off) and “blur” (meaning confused) reflect local conceptualisations that diverge from their Standard English counterparts. To the Malaysian speech community, these nativised lexemes not only are perceived as unique linguistic markers to be used for colloquial communications, but it has also evolved to become a symbolic concept that reflects cultural identity and social connectedness, embedding shared knowledge and social practices within their semantic structures (Kachru & Smith, 2008; Mohd Nasir, 2024).

Recent work by Zokirova and Mahmudova (2025) provides a comprehensive overview of lexical competence as a multidimensional construct, grounded in linguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives. The authors conceptualise lexical competence as encompassing not only vocabulary knowledge, but also semantic fields, phraseological units, polysemy, and the ability to select appropriate lexical items in context. In addition, their study highlights the role of the mental lexicon, associative networks, and memory processes in shaping lexical development, emphasising that lexical competence is closely tied to communicative effectiveness and speech culture. Furthermore, the authors advocate for a comprehensive pedagogical approach, incorporating communicative methods, interactive strategies, and digital technologies to support lexical acquisition.

While this perspective reinforces the view that lexical competence extends beyond mere vocabulary size and aligns with broader competency-based approaches in applied linguistics, it remains largely cognitive and pedagogical in orientation, with limited attention to the role of cultural conceptualisations in meaning-making. In particular, although associative processes are acknowledged as part of the mental lexicon, they are primarily treated as mechanisms for vocabulary development rather than as indicators of shared cultural schemas and categories within a speech community.

In contrast, the present study builds on and extends this line of inquiry by foregrounding the cultural dimension of lexical competence, drawing on Cultural Linguistics to examine how nativised English lexemes encode culturally specific meanings. By employing the Word Association-Interpretation (WAI) framework, this study moves beyond a purely psycholinguistic account to demonstrate that lexical competence is not only shaped by cognitive and communicative processes, but is also deeply embedded in culturally distributed conceptual systems, particularly in multilingual and postcolonial contexts such as Malaysian English (ME).

The Cultural Linguistics theory developed by Sharifian (2017), offers valuable insights through which these phenomena can be systematically examined. According to the scholar, language is not merely a system of arbitrary signs but a repository of cultural schemas, which are formed through cognitive structures that organize knowledge and experience. These schemas influence how speakers interpret words, particularly in multilingual settings where lexical items may carry overlapping or conflicting cultural associations. A prominent example can be seen in the ME term for “member” where only ME speakers may associate it to schemas such as “close friend”, “buddies”, or “special bond”, activating a schema of social solidarity that differs from its Standard English usage in formal contexts (Mohd Nasir, 2025).

One of the many approaches that Sharifian (2017) applies in his studies of Cultural Linguistics is the Word Association-Interpretation (WAI) method. However, although word association studies have long been used to explore semantic networks, their application in New Englishes research remains limited. This is because conventional approaches, which includes research by Sharifian, typically employ stimulus words from dominant English varieties that may not capture the cultural specificity of nativised lexemes. Thus, the intersection of lexical competence and cultural conceptualisations raises important questions about how proficiency should be assessed in diverse linguistic contexts. Since Kachru (2006) has highlighted the need to move beyond normative standards and acknowledge legitimacy of localised lexical innovations, the perspective aligns with broader calls in applied linguistics to reconceptualise language proficiency as a dynamic, context-dependent construct, rather than a fixed set of skills.

The WAI framework in this study, addresses these limitations by combining quantitative and qualitative methods to examine how cultural knowledge shapes lexical understanding. In doing so, it challenges the assumption that lexical competence is a universal construct, and instead highlight its situated nature in specific cultural and linguistic contexts. This approach not only advances theoretical discussions but also has practical implications for language education, where curricula often prioritize Standard English norms over local varieties. The novelty of the proposed framework lies in its integration of Cultural Linguistics with lexical competence research, offering a method of systematically analyse culturally embedded meanings. By foregrounding cultural conceptualisations as a core dimension of competence, the framework expands the scope of lexical research in New Englishes contexts.

Nativised English Lexemes in Malaysian English

In linguistics, the term *lexis* designates the complete set of all possible words in a language. It is also regarded as a particular subset of words that are grouped by some specific linguistic criteria (Ruano- García, 2010). With regard to New Englishes, Kachru (2006) argues that the powerful influence of localized lexical forms is what reflects a speech community’s way of articulation. ME, as with other new varieties of English around the world, also experiences linguistic readjustments at the lexical level due to the contact and influence of local languages in Malaysia. According to Jackson and Zé Amvela (2000) although nativisation is realized at all linguistic levels, it is usually through *lexis* that New Englishes best assert themselves

Malaysian English (ME) is often described as a continuum that ranges from the basilect variety used in informal contexts to the acrolect variety that closely resembles Standard English (Platt, Weber, & Ho, 1984). As a result of Malaysia’s multilingual and multicultural environment, the development of ME has been shaped by various linguistic influences including Malay, Chinese dialects, Tamil, Arabic, and British English, American English, and other languages as well (Yamaguchi & Deterding, 2016). In 1957, the variety reached the phase of nativisation, and soon achieved sociolinguistic status and domains of usage in Malaysia (Thirusanku & Melor, 2012).

According to Thirusanku and Melor (2012), lexical features of ME are especially seen through the process of lexical borrowings where indigenous languages in the country are slowly being incorporated. For example, lexical borrowings such as ‘*azan*’, ‘*jaga*’, ‘*ang-pao*’ and ‘*dhoti*’ are all native words but are also recognised as English words in Malaysian Standard English (Hajar, 2014). Another notable feature of ME is the presence of nativised English lexemes, which originates from English lexemes but have acquired locally specific meanings through processes of semantic shift. In many cases, these meanings reflect the cultural norms, social practices, and communicative conventions of the Malaysian society (Traugott, 2006; Azirah & Tan, 2012). Informalisation in

particular, has been identified as a prominent feature of ME, especially in everyday conversational contexts (Mohd Nasir, 2021).

Examples of nativised lexemes include words such as *blur*, *member*, *tackle*, *power*, and *cable* (Azirah & Tan, 2012; Mohd Nasir, 2021). While these words originate from Standard English, they carry meanings that are culturally specific among ME users. These examples demonstrate that lexical items in ME often encode meanings that are deeply connected to cultural knowledge and social interaction. As such, examining these lexemes offers valuable insights into how speakers conceptualise language within their cultural environment. In alignment with Sharifian's (2017) approach, the present study adapts the WAI framework from a list of 11 nativised English lexemes in ME under the category of Informalisation as stimulus words to elicit participants' cultural schemas and cultural categories, embedded within the ME variety. Table 1 presents the list of nativised lexical items used in the study.

Table 1 Nativised English Lexemes in ME under the Category of Informalisation

Words	Native Meanings	Informal Meanings/Substitutions in ME
1. Action	The fact or process of doing something	To show-off or a person who is boastful, cocky and arrogant
2. Best	A desirable type of quality	Lucky or great
3. Blur	Things that cannot be seen or heard clearly	Confused
4. Burn	Damages or injuries by heat or fire	Something that is gone or cannot be used anymore
5. Cable	A thick rope of wire used for construction	Having connections with established organizations
6. On	Physically in contact supported by a surface	To agree on an activity
7. Over	Extending directly upwards	Doing things exceeding what is necessary
8. Power	The ability or capacity to do something	Exceptional or great
9. Round	A circular shape or motion	To go out for a stroll
10. Sound	Vibrations that can be heard through the air	To be reprimanded or scolded
11. Tackle	An act of seizing while playing ball	To approach and flirt with an individual

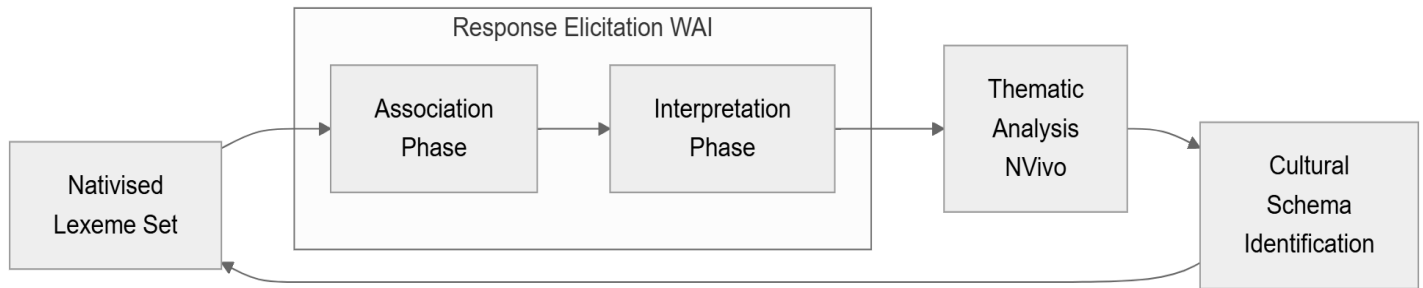
(Menon, 2003; Baskaran, 2005; Azli, 2010; Hajar, 2011; Azirah & Tan, 2012; Thirusanku & Melor, 2012; Lee & Hall, 2019; Fatima, 2021)

METHODOLOGY

The study involved 13 proficient Malaysian English (ME) speakers, in which they claim to occasional use for daily communications. They aged between 17 to 35 years old and represented Malaysia's major ethnic groups such as Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Bumiputeras from diverse linguistic, educational and regional backgrounds. In a semi-structured interview, all of the participants were generally asked to define, explain, and provide associations to a list of 11 stimulus words of nativised English lexemes in ME to elicit cultural conceptualisations. In order to examine cultural conceptualisations embedded in lexical items, this paper proposes a methodological framework based on a Word Association-Interpretation approach developed in Cultural Linguistics (Sharifian, 2017).

The method consists of two main stages, which includes the association phase and the interpretation phase. In the association phase, participants were presented with the 11 stimulus words and asked to provide spontaneous associations, explanations, or interpretations related to each stimulus word. These responses serve as indicators of the conceptual knowledge associated with the lexical item. In the interpretation stage, researcher then analyse these responses to identify underlying cultural conceptual structures that included cultural schemas and cultural categories. Figure 1 illustrates the WAI framework.

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework for Analysing Cultural Conceptualisations in Nativised Lexemes



For data analysis, results were analysed based on a thematic analysis approach with the use of Nvivo 14. Mainly, the study focuses on two central constructs of the WAI framework, which includes cultural schemas and cultural categories. Cultural schemas refer to the culturally shared cognitive structures that guide how members of a community interpret experiences and construct meaning (Strauss & Quinn, 1997). These schemas encode collective knowledge, values, and behavioural expectations that shape social understanding (Sharifian, 2017, p.7). Cultural categories represent culturally grounded ways of organising and classifying experiences, such as those related to food, kinship, emotions, and social roles, which are often reflected in linguistic expressions (Sharifian, 2017, p.15).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 Participants' Response for the Stimulus Word 'Action'

Themes	Associations/Interpretations
Cultural Schema	Arrogant (P1); Voguish (P2); Too much (P3); Arrogant (P4); Pretentious (P5); Bragging (P6); Macho (P7); Show-off (P8); Arrogant (P9); Boasting (P10); Pretending (P11); Too arrogant (P12); Showing-off (P13)

Presented in Table 2 are participants' responses for the stimulus word 'action'. Findings reveal that the word '*action*' appeared to have largely evoked cultural schemas that were associated with the act of not being true to oneself by showing-off, boasting, pretending, bragging or displaying arrogance to others. The interpretative analysis carried out for this stimulus word points to the fact that in the Malaysian culture, '*action*' is one of the more popular and concrete linguistic expressions that people use to refer to negative behaviours instead of simply an act or a thing done as in the Standard English meaning. These negative associations in a way, reflect the core principles of the Malaysian culture where modesty is highly valued and one should not brag, show-off or act in a boastful way.

Table 3 Participants' Response for the Stimulus Word 'Best'

Themes	Associations/Interpretations
Cultural Category	Fun (P1); Awesome (P2); Enjoyable (P3); Amused (P4); Enjoy (P5); Entertaining (P6); Good (P7); Nice (P8); Fun (P9); Good (P10); Joyful (P11); Good time (P12); Having fun (P13)

Table 3 shows that majority of the participants referred the stimulus word '*best*' to various aspects of enjoyment or positive emotions. As seen in the spontaneous responses given by the participants, this ME lexeme is perceived as one of the most commonly used lexemes that Malaysians of all ages simply know. The results definitely prove that many aspects of a speech community's language are shaped by elements of cultural cognition that have prevailed at different stages in the history of that community and have left traces in subsequent linguistic practice as stated by Sharifian (2017). This observation provides support for the view that language serves as a collective memory bank of the cultural cognition of a speech community and that for strongly-rooted localised lexemes such as '*best*', improper or incorrect use of the word may even expose an individual's inadequacy of the local variety since it is regarded as a fixed way of expressing enjoyment in the Malaysian cultural conceptualisation.

Table 4 Participants' Response for the Stimulus Word 'Blur'

Themes	Associations/Interpretations
Cultural Category	Slow (P1); Emotionless (P2); Dumbfounded (P3); Confused (P4); Not giving attention (P5); Lost (P6); Don't understand (P7); Puzzled (P8); Not focusing (P9); Empty-minded (P10); Lost (P11); Perplexed (P12); Having no idea (P13)

A large number of participants' responses for the nativised lexeme, '*blur*' shows that the stimulus word is associated with the mental state of being confused or puzzled. Interestingly, the responses appeared to be closely similar in terms of cultural conceptualisations characterised by educational settings, indicating that the lexeme is mostly used within the context of learning. According to Sharifian (2017), this is not an unusual phenomenon as cultural conceptualisations may also be attributed in various degrees to several sources including experience in similar physical environments and events.

Table 5 Participants' Response for the Stimulus Word 'Burn'

Themes	Associations/Interpretations
Cultural Category	Losing something, especially money (P1); Losing money (P2); Non-refundable tickets (P3); Loss of money (P4); Tickets you cannot use anymore (P5); Something you can no longer use (P6); A cancelled ticket (P7); Money you won't get back (P8); Loss of money (P9); Detrimental costs (P10); To lose money (P11); To suffer the loss of money (P12); Cannot refund (P13)

Associations made in response to the stimulus word 'burn' in Table 5 demonstrate that the cultural category evoked here is related to the situation where something cannot be used anymore rather than damages or injuries by heat or fire as in the Aboriginal English meanings. An important point to note in the analysis is how these associations revealed the comprehensive knowledge and awareness of the participants who mostly described '*burn*' as to losing money or tickets specifically. These responses instantiate how specific the concept of this particular lexeme is in the ME conceptualisation to the extent that money can be depicted as being burnt in fire due to financial loss. Since figurative language such as this does not portray its realistic meaning, it can be observed that the ability to use or interpret this type of linguistic style indicates a speaker's high levels of communicative competence because of the need for contextual understanding. Evidently, the analytical frameworks of cultural linguistics prove to be an effective tool for examining cultural and communicative competence in conceptualisations of expressions through lexical features of human languages.

Table 6 Participants' Response for the Stimulus Word 'Cable'

Themes	Associations/Interpretations
Cultural Category	Got ties with someone in high position (P1); Connection (P2); Relations that benefit you (P3); A connection with someone important (P4); A connection that can elevate your position (P5); Connections with someone higher up (P6); An insider (P7); Connection with someone (P8); Having the right connections (P9); Special connection (P10); Connections (P11); Networking with important people (P12); Ties with high positioned people (P13)

Next, in Table 6, majority of the participants revealed that for the stimulus word '*cable*', the lexeme evoked cultural conceptualisations that were organized under the theme of cultural category, where interpretations were closely linked to having strong connections with higher authorities or powerful people, especially for the need to resolve certain problems or to elevate a person's current position. Once again, data that reflected ME conceptualisations from all thirteen of the participants, captured what is stipulated to be a popular linguistic culture among the Malaysian speech community, which can be explained with reference to their experiences. From here, the study shows that by applying the Association-Interpretation method in Cultural Linguistics, researchers not only are able to obtain data on participants' first-hand experiences, but is also able to capture encyclopaedic meanings that is culturally constructed and instantiated in lexical items of human languages.

Table 7 Participants' Response for the Stimulus Word 'On'

Themes	Associations/Interpretations
Cultural Schema	Up for something (P1); Confirmation (P2); Let's go (P3); To agree on a planned event (P4); Up for it (P5); To agree to do something together (P6); To confirm (P7); To agree on a plan (P8); To agree (P9); To agree and confirm (P10); To do it! (P11); Going for it (P12); To execute a plan (P13)

Another lexical item largely indexed to cultural schema that embodied norms and expectations of behaviour in ME is the stimulus word '*on*'. Clusterings in the associative responses showed that this nativised English lexeme in ME is actually a shortened version of the English phrase '*it is on*' or '*we are on*' and that it is usually embedded in the phrase '*on tak on*' in ME. From an emic analysis, the possible reason behind this phenomenon is that ME lexemes are constantly going through processes of semantic shift which results to the emergence of new and trending youth slangs or phrases. According to Thurairaj et al. (2015), a lot of these slangs or phrases are mostly developed due to the habit of shortening words among the Malaysian speech community

Table 8 Participants' Response for the Stimulus Word 'Over'

Themes	Associations/Interpretations
Cultural Schema	Acting out of control (P1); Overreacting (P2); Overly dramatic (P3); Emotional (P4); Doing something excessively (P5); Exaggerating (P6); Abnormal behaviour (P7); Overreacting (P8); Extra (P9); Exaggerated behaviour (P10); Over-acting (P11); Exaggerative behaviour (P12); Excessive actions (P13)

For the next stimulus word, which is '*over*', analysis of the responses in Table 8 shows that associations made by participants of the study mainly evoked cultural schemas of norms and expectations of behaviour. The rationale behind this conceptualisation is the observation that '*over*' is generally associated with the norms of 'over reacting' or 'an exaggeration of behaviour' in the ME cultural context. Interpretative analysis of the responses led to the understanding that this nativised English lexeme in ME, is another example which derives from the shortening of the phrase '*over the top*' in the English language to simply '*over*' in ME. As a lot of the lexical features of ME are commonly developed through processes of shortening words, findings of the study once again reflect participants' comprehensive lexical knowledge and competence through assessments of their cultural conceptualisations.

Table 9 Participants' Response for the Stimulus Word 'Power'

Themes	Associations/Interpretations
Cultural Category	Very good at something (P1); Great or awesome (P2); To be really good at something (P3); Having great performance (P4); Impressive (P5); Good at something (P6); Someone achievable (P7); Really good at something (P8); Skilful (P9); Strong and good at something (P10); Really good at a job or skill (P11); Impressive performance (P12); Really good (P13)

Apart from the stimulus words '*action*', '*cable*', and '*on*', the nativised lexeme, '*power*' was also found as a stimulus word that all thirteen participants were able to tap into their cultural-conceptual systems. As displayed in Table 9, responses largely reflected associative links to the cultural category of attributes that relate to characteristics of greatness or impressiveness, as well as skilfulness or ability. It can be observed here that although the native English meaning of '*power*' may seem quite similar to the ME meaning, conceptualisations from the ME culture as shown from the participants reveal that it is often used as adjectives rather than nouns or verbs. These examples clearly reflect how some cultural categories are encoded in the grammatical system of a language and that for ME speakers, the ability to accurately, effectively, and appropriately use these lexemes with its correct grammatical function illustrates how competent they are.

Table 10 Participants' Response for the Stimulus Word 'Round'

Themes	Associations/Interpretations
Cultural Schema	Going out because of boredom (P1); Going somewhere and just <i>jalan-jalan</i> (P2); Walking or going places (P3); To stroll and just <i>lepak</i> somewhere (P4); Checking out to search for new places (P5); Going around in a car (P6); To walk or stroll (P7); Going places (P8); Travelling (P9); Going around and around, like <i>pusing-pusing</i> (P10); To go for a stroll around someplace new (P11); Going around and around to find someplace to just chill (P12); To go out (P13)

Based on the responses in Table 10, it is noticeable that this is another predominant reflection of the cultural schema conceptualisation associated with norms and expectations of behaviour in ME. While participants had similar agreements that 'round' in ME is not referred to geometric figures or shapes as defined in the Aboriginal English language, several extended meanings were also captured in the analysis including going out because of boredom as well as going out to search for new places to visit and explore. More interestingly, findings showed that in order to precisely describe the lexeme, several participants instantly provided associative responses obtained from Malay language words such as '*jalan-jalan*', '*pusing-pusing*', and '*lepak*'. This proves that in order to gain full understandings on the definition of 'round' in ME, this would require speakers to fully understand the use of certain slangs and jargons in Bahasa Malaysia as well.

Table 11 Participants' Response for the Stimulus Word 'Sound'

Themes	Associations/Interpretations
Cultural Schema	To tell someone off (P1); Bickering, or more precise, like <i>beleter</i> (P2); To scold someone (P3); Scolding someone in an enraging manner (P4); To get pissed at someone (P5); To reprimand someone, or more like <i>tegur</i> (P6); To warn nicely, like from a teacher or a mother (P7); (P8); To reprimand someone in a strict way (P9); To get angry at someone (P10); To scold someone as a warning (P11); Giving high-pitch and intense warning (P12); To get angry with someone (P13)

Schematic associations for the stimulus word 'sound' in Table 11 revealed that a majority of the participants related it to definitions of strict behaviours such as scolding or reprimanding someone in the culture. It is evident that participants were fully aware that the lexeme did not refer to vibrations that can be heard, or even reliable and sensible characteristics of a person as in the phrase '*a sound person*' in the English language. These responses are also some of the many examples that show participants' level of understandings in using nativised English lexemes in ME within the socio-cultural context. More interestingly, was how each participant described the degree or level of 'anger' when it comes to the act of scolding a person. For example, some participants believed that the lexeme is used when a speaker intends to scold someone in an enraging manner. Other participants believed that it is actually a more polite way of reprimanding because the lexeme 'scold' in English presents a more intense illustration. This is why in the theory of cultural linguistic, the reality of languages and cultures is much more heterogenous and distributed and far from the traditional belief that one culture shares the same way of thinking (Sharifian, 2017).

Table 12 Participants' Response for the Stimulus Word 'Tackle'

Themes	Associations/Interpretations
Cultural Schema	Flirting (P1); To flirt with a girl (P2); Flirting with an <i>awet</i> (P3); To approach a girl (P4); To win over a girl (P5); The act of attracting someone, especially girls (P6); To win the heart of someone (P7); To attract (P8); Trying to get someone, like a girl (P9); To woo a girl (P10); To flirt and approach a girl (P11); A boy's first move in approaching a girl (P12); To flirt (P13).

As shown in Table 12, it was observed that associative responses elicited in the stimulus word '*tackle*' revealed both schematic cultural knowledge of norms and expectations of behaviour as well as the roles and expectations of behaviour. Through the responses, it was analysed that the stimulus word depicts the behaviour of flirting with

someone, or may also directly associate it to men's linguistic repertoire with regards to their masculine role in flirting. However, none of the participants seemed to describe that the action was related to flirting with a 'woman', but more to 'girls' in specific. This phenomenon can be explained based on the Cultural Linguistics theory that many speech communities around the world, adopt and adapt non-native English lexemes to encode and express their own cultural conceptualisations and worldviews based on their prior knowledge and experiences. Thus, it can be assumed that participants who associated 'tackle' specifically in regards to 'boys' flirting with 'girls', could have had personal experiences during their teenage or early adulthood on the use of this lexeme. The study highlights once again that participants in the study do portray relatively high levels of lexical competence of nativised English lexemes in ME based on their ability to provide culture-specific behaviours and roles associated with the lexeme.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to address a key limitation in lexical competence research, which has traditionally prioritised dimensions such as vocabulary size, depth, and use, while overlooking the role of cultural knowledge in shaping lexical meaning. Drawing on insights from Cultural Linguistics, particularly the work of Sharifian (2017), the study proposed the Word Association–Interpretation (WAI) framework as a methodological approach for examining cultural conceptualisations embedded in nativised English lexemes. The findings demonstrate that Malaysian English (ME) lexemes consistently evoke shared cultural schemas and cultural categories, reflecting collective knowledge, values, and social practices within the Malaysian speech community. Lexemes such as action, cable, and tackle revealed culturally grounded interpretations associated with behavioural norms, social relationships, and identity, while others such as best, blur, and power illustrated how emotional, cognitive, and evaluative meanings are culturally organised. These patterns provide empirical support for the view that lexical meaning is not solely a matter of semantic knowledge, but is deeply shaped by culturally distributed conceptualisations, as argued in Cultural Linguistics.

In relation to existing literature, the findings extend traditional models of lexical competence by demonstrating that proficiency cannot be fully accounted for through structural or quantitative measures alone. Instead, the ability to interpret and appropriately use nativised lexemes requires speakers to access shared cultural schemas and categories, thereby aligning with Kachru's (2005) argument on the legitimacy of localised lexical innovation in World Englishes. The study therefore supports a reconceptualisation of lexical competence as a context-dependent and culturally situated construct, rather than a universal set of decontextualised skills. Methodologically, the WAI framework offers a systematic approach to capturing culturally embedded meanings through the use of locally relevant lexical stimuli and interpretive analysis. By integrating word association techniques with Cultural Linguistics, the framework demonstrates its effectiveness in uncovering the relationship between language, cognition, and culture in multilingual settings. This contributes to ongoing discussions on how lexical competence can be more accurately assessed in postcolonial contexts, where English has undergone processes of nativisation.

Overall, the study highlights that cultural conceptualisations constitute a measurable and essential dimension of lexical competence. By foregrounding this dimension, the proposed framework not only expands theoretical understandings of lexical knowledge but also provides practical implications for language teaching, assessment, and research in World Englishes. In addition, its methodology can be adapted to develop culturally responsive teaching materials, refine dictionary entries for nativised varieties, and enhance intercultural awareness among speakers of different English varieties. The framework's emphasis on cultural grounding challenges traditional assumptions about lexical assessment, suggesting that proficiency in World Englishes requires to both linguistic and extralinguistic dimensions of meaning. Future research may further explore the applicability of the WAI framework across different English varieties and larger participant groups, thereby strengthening its potential as a robust tool for examining culturally grounded lexical competence.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

The main author fully contributed in preparing this journal article.

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