

The Introvert's Toolkit

¹Nor Aslah Adzmi, ²Samsiah Bidin, ³Robekkah Harun, ^{*4}Nurazila Abdul Aziz, ⁵Mohd Rozman Mohd Nasir, ⁶Mohammad Ikhwan Saidi

¹²³⁴Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah Branch,

⁵⁶Faculty of Arts and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA Kedah Branch

***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

The Introvert's Toolkit is a practical resource designed to help passive speakers, especially introverts and non-native speakers, engage confidently in small talk. Small talks can be particularly challenging for individuals with speaking anxiety, especially introverts or non-native speakers who may feel self-conscious or overwhelmed in casual conversations. Unlike traditional modules, it recognizes diverse communication styles and offers tailored tools to support learners at different comfort levels. This makes it highly relevant to language learning and education, as it builds pragmatic competence which is the ability to use language effectively in social contexts. The module teaches key skills like turn-taking, polite expressions, intonation, and cultural awareness, all essential for real-world communication. It also supports social-emotional learning by fostering confidence, empathy, and self-awareness, while accommodating different learning styles. This inclusivity makes it especially effective for ESP courses, where professional, cross-cultural communication is key. The toolkit includes self-awareness activities, scripted conversation starters, gradual exposure tasks, and cultural sensitivity guidance. These features help reduce speaking anxiety, build soft skills, and promote emotional intelligence that supports both personal and professional growth. Aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, the project promotes Quality Education (SDG 4) through inclusive learning, Decent Work (SDG 8) by preparing learners for the workforce, Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10) by empowering marginalized voices, and Peace and Strong Institutions (SDG 16) through respectful, cross-cultural dialogue. Overall, The Introvert's Toolkit enhances communication in diverse educational and workplace settings, making it a valuable tool for inclusive, effective language education.

Keywords: Introvert, Small Talk, Speaking Anxiety

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

In today's globalized world, English functions as the dominant lingua franca across business, academia, and technological innovation, shaping access to employment, mobility, and participation in international networks (UCT Language Centre, 2025; Cambridge English, n.d.; Pearson, 2023). Employers consistently link English proficiency to productivity and career advancement, yet a persistent gap remains between learners' language skills and the demands of contemporary workplaces (Clement & Murugavel, 2018). This mismatch undermines efficiency, limits promotion opportunities, and contributes to missed business prospects, while technological shifts such as generative AI, which predominantly relies on English, further intensify the need for advanced competence (Financial Times, 2025). Despite the widespread adoption of communicative language teaching (CLT), many learners, particularly introverts and non-native speakers, continue to struggle with speaking anxiety in informal interactions (Putri & Suryani, 2023; Chen, 2021).

At the heart of this challenge lies pragmatic competence, the ability to use language effectively and appropriately in social contexts, which remains underemphasized in language curricula (Taguchi & Roever,

2020). Small talk, often dismissed as trivial, is in fact a vital skill for relationship building and professional integration. Yet introverted learners frequently disengage from spontaneous exchanges, preferring reflective, one-on-one communication (Zhang, 2021), while non-native speakers face linguistic insecurity, limited exposure to colloquial language, and heightened risk of cultural missteps (Kobayashi, 2022). Traditional pedagogical approaches that privilege extroverted participation, fluency, and rapid verbal output overlook the affective and sociocultural dimensions of communication, further exacerbating speaking anxiety and limiting inclusive participation (Norton & Toohey, 2019; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2020).

Addressing this gap is both pedagogically and socially significant. Without adequate support, introverted and non-native speakers risk exclusion from meaningful interactions, hindering their academic performance, career growth, and social integration. The Introvert's Toolkit directly responds to this challenge by providing a learner-centred resource that validates diverse communication styles while offering practical strategies for confident small talk. Grounded in social-emotional learning (SEL) principles and aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2021), the toolkit advances inclusive pedagogy by integrating pragmatic instruction, reducing speaking anxiety, and fostering empowerment.

Objectives

Specifically, the objectives of The Introvert's Toolkit are to:

1. Enhance pragmatic competence by equipping learners with skills in turn-taking, politeness strategies, intonation, and culturally appropriate expressions, with measurable improvement in learners' performance during role-play and simulated interactions.
2. Foster inclusive participation by validating reflective and introverted communication styles, assessed through increased learner engagement and participation in classroom or workplace scenarios.
3. Promote learner confidence and empowerment in small talk and spontaneous interactions, demonstrated through observable increases in willingness to communicate (WTC) in real or simulated contexts.

By pursuing these goals, The Introvert's Toolkit seeks to transform small talk from a source of anxiety into a pathway for confidence, inclusion, and opportunity. Accordingly, this paper introduces the toolkit as an innovation in language education, situates it within the broader field of pragmatic competence development, and demonstrates its potential to bridge critical gaps in academic and workplace communication.

PRODUCT DESCRIPTION & METHODOLOGY

The Introvert's Toolkit is a **practical module consisting of activities and worksheets** designed to help passive speakers of English to get **engaged confidently in small talk**. The **key elements** of the toolkit are self-awareness activities, training, scripted conversation starters, gradual exposure tasks, and cultural sensitivity guidance. These features help reduce speaking anxiety, build soft skills, and promote emotional intelligence that supports both personal and professional growth. The activities are divided into **five phases of learning development** with a brief **Introduction to small talk** as the preamble (Figure 1).

Phase 1: Fill in the GAP. Through a hands-on activity, participants match/ place the expressions in the correct blanks, thus enhancing their understanding of small talk expressions at workplace setting. Participants receive a handout containing a short dialogue with several missing words or phrases. Alongside this, they are given strips of expressions or possible answers. Their task is to read through the dialogue carefully and place the correct expressions into the blanks. This activity allows them to familiarize themselves with typical conversational structures and phrases used in small talk.

Phase 2: Arrange them RIGHT. Participants get into groups of three (3) members, and each group is given a set of mixed-up conversations that are out of order. Their task is to rearrange the dialogue strips into the correct sequence, ensuring that the conversation flows naturally from introduction, to maintaining discussion, to closing. Once rearranged, they also fill in any blanks with suitable expressions of their own. This activity develops both sequencing skills and the confidence to contribute their own words into a conversation.

Phase 3: Act it OUT. Finally, participants put their practice into action. Working in pairs or small groups, they act out the completed dialogues to practice tone, body language, natural delivery and also encourages confidence.

Phase 4: Ready, GET SET! Participants are shown pictures of different settings such as a hotel counter, a fast-food restaurant, or other everyday situations where small talk is common. Based on these scenarios, they are asked to create their own short roleplays in pairs or groups.

Phase 5: Take One, ACTION! Participants perform the roleplay. They learn how to interact in various situations, develop empathy, boost their imagination and creativity.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a **qualitative action research design** to examine the effectiveness of The Introvert's Toolkit in reducing speaking anxiety and improving learners' confidence in small talk. Action research was chosen because the intervention was implemented directly in the classroom context and iteratively evaluated to improve practice. The research was exploratory in nature, focusing on how structured activities and gradual exposure tasks supported participants' communicative development.

Participants

The study was conducted with the support staff at UiTM Kedah Branch who self-identified as passive speakers of English and expressed anxiety when engaging in small talk. A total of 6 participants volunteered themselves, and informed consent was obtained prior to the study.

Instruments and Materials

The primary instructional instrument was The Introvert's Toolkit, a structured module consisting of activities and worksheets designed to engage learners in authentic small-talk interactions. Supplementary materials included dialogue handouts, mixed conversation strips, roleplay prompts, and scenario-based images. To evaluate the intervention, two data collection tools were employed:

1. **Observation checklists** completed by instructors to record learners' pragmatic and linguistic performance during activities.
2. **Reflective feedback** (written/ verbal) by participants to capture their self-awareness, emotional responses, and perceived progress.

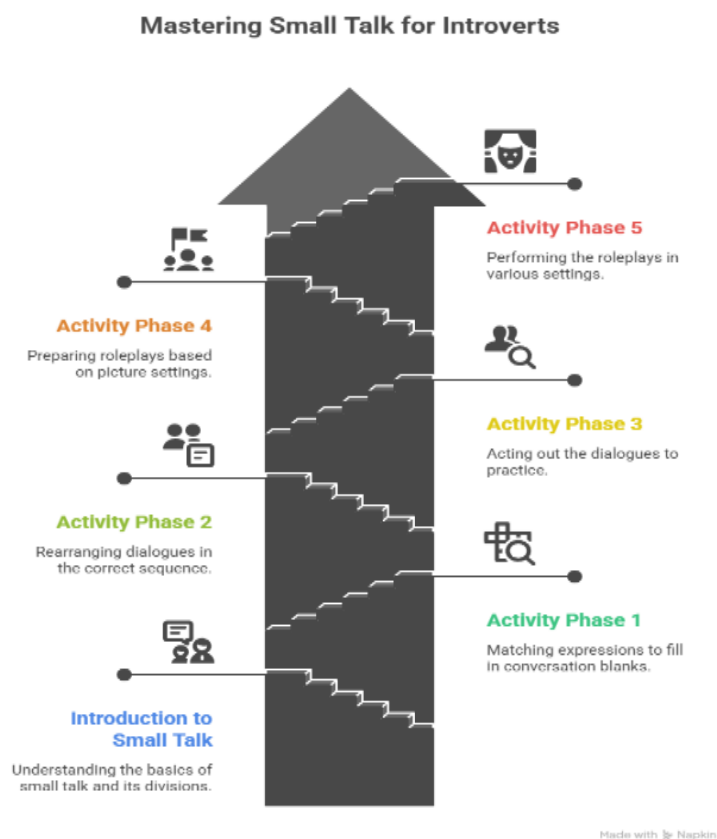
Procedure

The module was implemented over five phases, preceded by a short introduction to the nature and importance of small talk. Then followed by Phase 1: Fill in the GAP, Phase 2: Arrange them RIGHT, Phase 3: Act it OUT, Phase 4: Ready, GET SET! And Phase 5: Take One, ACTION!

Data Analysis

Observational data and reflective feedback were subjected to **thematic analysis**, allowing the identification of recurring patterns related to learner engagement, emotional intelligence, and pragmatic development.

Figure 1: The Introvert's Toolkit Enhancement Activities



FINDINGS AND COMMERCIALISATION

Findings

Improved pragmatic and linguistic performance

Participants demonstrated clear improvements in pragmatic and linguistic performance during simulated interactions. Role-play observations revealed gains in turn-taking, fluency, intonation, and cultural appropriateness. Learners showed more natural pauses, effective use of fillers, and stronger management of conversational flow, skills often underdeveloped in grammar-focused instruction. They also displayed greater awareness of politeness strategies and context-sensitive language use, such as adjusting formality levels according to social settings or interlocutor status, which are critical competencies in professional and academic environments (Kobayashi, 2022).

Inclusive participation, reduced speaking anxiety

The Introvert's Toolkit, piloted in workplace training workshops at UiTM Kedah Branch, produced significant pedagogical, psychological, and intercultural benefits. A particularly important outcome was the reduction of speaking anxiety among introverted learners and non-native speakers. Anxiety has long been identified as a major barrier to oral participation in second language contexts, especially in unstructured or high stakes speaking tasks (Chen, 2021). The toolkit's structured, low-stakes design, featuring scripted starters, self-paced practice, and gradual exposure, helped learners build competence incrementally while reducing fear. Qualitative feedback confirmed that participants felt more emotionally supported and less judged, contributing to a safer and more inclusive learning environment (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2020).

Noticeable increase in learner confidence and willingness to communicate (WTC)

Another notable finding was a rise in learner confidence and willingness to communicate (WTC) in informal social contexts. Many language programs teach discrete skills but struggle to foster readiness to initiate and

sustain conversations. The toolkit addressed this gap through self-efficacy-building activities that highlighted learners' progress. In line with contemporary WTC models (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2020), the toolkit lowered psychological barriers and encouraged risk-taking in supportive contexts. Post-program interviews revealed participants felt empowered to start conversations at networking events, join group discussions, and engage in casual workplace interactions, skills vital for academic integration and career advancement (World Economic Forum, 2023).

These outcomes position the Introvert's Toolkit as more than a language resource. It emerges as a transformative tool fostering personal development, emotional well-being, and intercultural competence. By reducing anxiety, improving communicative skills, and strengthening confidence, the toolkit redefines competence for 21st-century communicators.

Commercialisation

The Introvert's Toolkit has commercial potential in multiple markets:

- Education Sector: Marketable as a resource for schools and universities
- Corporate Training: Marketable as a resource for integration into employee onboarding, leadership development, and diversity and inclusion programs.

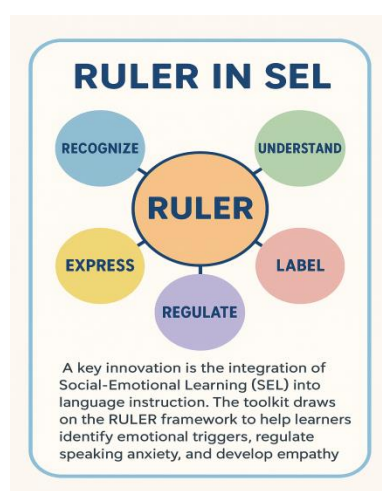
Revenue streams may include direct sales and workshop facilitation. The selling price of the printed module is RM15 per unit (The cost per unit = RM10), which is considered affordable.

Novelty and Recommendations

The Introvert's Toolkit represents a major innovation in language education by rethinking how communication is taught, especially for learners underserved by conventional pedagogy. Traditional classrooms often equate communicative competence with extroverted traits such as fluency, assertiveness, and constant participation. The toolkit challenges this bias by **affirming introversion as a legitimate communication style**, emphasizing active listening, reflective responses, and thoughtful engagement as valuable strengths (Zhang, 2021). By reframing introversion as an advantage rather than a deficit, it promotes an inclusive environment where success is defined by authenticity rather than conformity to extroverted norms (Norton & Toohey, 2019).

A key innovation is the integration of **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)** into language instruction. Rather than treating affective factors as peripheral, the toolkit draws on the RULER framework to help learners identify emotional triggers, regulate speaking anxiety, and develop empathy (Brackett et al., 2021) (Figure 2). Activities such as reflective journaling and supportive peer feedback foster emotional intelligence alongside linguistic competence, creating a holistic model of growth rarely present in existing resources (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2020).

Figure 2: The integration of RULER (SEL) in The Introvert's Toolkit innovation





The toolkit also adopts a **culturally responsive approach** to pragmatic instruction. Small talk is framed as a nuanced practice requiring explicit guidance, with learners exploring cultural differences in politeness, humour, and conversational norms (Kobayashi, 2022). Through case studies and comparative dialogues, students develop intercultural sensitivity, positioning the toolkit as both linguistically rigorous and socially responsible.

Another distinctive element is its application of a **gradual exposure framework** inspired by cognitive-behavioural therapy. Learners progress from self-paced practice to structured peer exchanges and, finally, spontaneous real-world conversations, supported by mindfulness and anxiety-reduction strategies (Putri & Suryani, 2023). This therapeutic integration is rare in language education and underscores the toolkit's originality in addressing emotional as well as linguistic challenges.

Finally, the toolkit's **alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** amplifies its significance. By addressing SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), it links language education to broader goals of equity and inclusion (UNESCO, 2021). By empowering introverted and non-native learners, the toolkit promotes fairer access to communication while equipping individuals with intercultural competence and emotional intelligence valued in today's workforce (World Economic Forum, 2023). Thus, the Introvert's Toolkit is more than a classroom resource; it is a catalyst for personal empowerment and social transformation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Looking forward, several avenues can expand the toolkit's impact. First, **digital integration** could enhance accessibility, with adaptive online modules or AI-driven simulations that provide learners with personalized, low-stakes environments for practicing small talk. Second, **longitudinal research** is needed to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of combining SEL, pragmatic instruction, and CBT-informed strategies, particularly in diverse cultural and institutional contexts. Finally, partnerships with policymakers and curriculum designers could support **scalability and institutional adoption**, ensuring that the innovation reaches learners across varied educational systems.

CONCLUSION

The Introvert's Toolkit stands out as an original and inclusive response to long-standing gaps in language education by validating introversion, embedding SEL, foregrounding cross-cultural pragmatics, and integrating therapeutic approaches into communicative practice. Unlike conventional solutions, it redefines what it means to succeed in communication by centring authenticity, emotional well-being, and intercultural awareness. Future development should focus on digital delivery, empirical validation, and cross-sector applications to maximize its transformative potential. As both a pedagogical resource and a social innovation, the toolkit not only empowers learners but also models a more equitable and human-centred vision of language education. marginalized

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