

Bridging the Gap: Challenges and Teacher Adaptations in Implementing CEFR-Aligned English Textbooks in Orang Asli (Semai) Schools

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in Malaysia's English language curriculum aims to standardize language learning and teaching across diverse school contexts. However, the unique sociolinguistic and cultural realities of indigenous communities, particularly the Semai people of Peninsular Malaysia, raise important questions about the relevance and effectiveness of CEFR-aligned materials. This qualitative study investigates the challenges faced by English language teachers and the pedagogical adaptations they employ when using CEFR-aligned textbooks in Orang Asli primary schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers from three Semai-majority schools in Perak, alongside insights from a local Tok Batin (village leader). Thematic analysis revealed multiple implementation challenges, including cultural disconnect, linguistic mismatch, lack of digital support, and curriculum misalignment. Teachers responded by localizing content, simplifying language, and supplementing with oral storytelling and visuals to bridge comprehension gaps. While the CEFR textbooks offer structured progression and communicative emphasis, participants expressed concerns over their suitability for low-proficiency, culturally distinct learners. The findings underscore the need for flexible, culturally responsive adaptations and policy support to ensure equitable English literacy development in indigenous education. This study contributes to ongoing discussions on textbook localization, teacher agency, and inclusive education within the framework of national language reforms.

Keywords: CEFR, Orang Asli, Semai, textbook adaptation, indigenous education, textbook implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's alignment of its national English curriculum with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a central component of the Malaysian English Language Education Reform Roadmap (2015–2025). This policy shift aims to position Malaysian learners within international linguistic benchmarks by standardizing English language proficiency nationwide. Lee et al. (2022) argued that the adoption of CEFR was designed to enhance communicative competence while harmonizing curriculum delivery, assessment standards, and teacher expectations across the education system. Earlier, according to the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2019), the reform also seeks to modernize English language teaching practices, shifting from a grammar-focused model toward one that prioritizes functional and real-life language use.

As part of this reform, CEFR-aligned textbooks were introduced in a phased rollout beginning in 2017 for primary and lower secondary levels, with the aim of scaffolding students' progression through clearly defined performance levels (Lee et al., 2022). Uri and Aziz (2018) observed that these materials emphasize authentic

communication, interactive learning tasks, and learner autonomy, and these principles are consistent with CEFR's communicative approach. To support teachers in this transition, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2019) implemented nationwide professional development programmes, ensuring educators were familiar with CEFR descriptors and their application in classroom instruction.

However, Shak et al. (2021) reported that the imported CEFR-aligned English textbooks including 'Super Minds', 'Get Smart Plus', and 'PULSE 2' present several challenges. These include imbalanced cultural content, high lexical density, lack of supplementary materials, steep pricing, and an opaque selection process. They argued that these issues complicate implementation, especially in diverse Malaysian classrooms, and recommended a transparent, locally sensitive textbook evaluation framework.

Recent studies have drawn attention to the realities of CEFR implementation in rural and indigenous contexts, particularly in Orang Asli communities. Arumugam et al. (2022) argued that CEFR-aligned materials, while pedagogically sound, often contain cultural references, contexts, and vocabulary unfamiliar to learners in remote areas. Rashid et al. (2017) found that teachers in rural schools frequently modify or supplement CEFR-aligned content to make it culturally relevant, substituting examples involving foreign festivals, foods, or climates with local equivalents.

Additional work by Shak et al. (2021) on PULSE 2 revealed that even after three years of use, teachers continued to perceive the textbook as linguistically demanding and culturally distant from students' lived experiences, prompting frequent adaptation. More recently, Shak et al. (2023) documented Malaysian ESL teachers' strategies for addressing foreign cultural content in PULSE 2. These included collaborative learning activities, integrating multimedia resources, using authentic local reading materials, and tailoring lesson content to match students' proficiency and cultural contexts. Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of adaptation, especially in educational settings where English may be a third or fourth language.

While the CEFR reform has been widely discussed in mainstream educational contexts, there remains limited empirical research on its implementation in Orang Asli (Semai) schools. In such contexts, English is often learned after the mother tongue (Bahasa Semai) and the national language (Bahasa Melayu), making CEFR-level targets challenging to achieve without significant adaptation. The present study, entitled "Bridging the Gap: Challenges and Teacher Adaptations in Implementing CEFR-Aligned English Textbooks in Orang Asli (Semai) Schools", seeks to address this gap by exploring three key questions:

1. What challenges do teachers face when implementing CEFR-aligned English textbooks in Orang Asli (Semai) primary schools?
2. How do teachers adapt CEFR materials to align with the linguistic and cultural contexts of Semai students?
3. To what extent do teachers perceive CEFR-aligned textbooks as effective in supporting English literacy development among Orang Asli learners?

By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute to the limited body of empirical work on CEFR implementation in indigenous Malaysian schools, offering insights into the practical realities, pedagogical adaptations, and policy implications of delivering CEFR-aligned instruction in contexts where linguistic, cultural, and resource challenges intersect.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the implementation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in Malaysia has grown steadily since its adoption as part of the English Language Education Reform Roadmap (2015–2025). Much of this scholarship has focused on mainstream and urban schools, examining teacher readiness, textbook suitability, and assessment alignment (Uri & Aziz, 2018; Lee et al., 2022; Shak et al., 2021). These studies have highlighted systemic challenges, including unfamiliar cultural content, high lexical demands, and uneven teacher preparedness, while also noting the benefits of standardized progression and communicative approaches.

However, this body of work reflects a clear imbalance: indigenous and marginalized learner groups, such as the Orang Asli, remain largely absent from the literature. Despite longstanding concerns about educational inequality, dropout rates, and linguistic marginalization among indigenous children (Rosnon, 2016; Nor et al., 2011), few studies have examined how CEFR-aligned reforms unfold in these contexts. This omission is striking given that Orang Asli learners often encounter English not as a second but as a third or even fourth language, following Semai and Malay. Such linguistic layering, combined with socio-economic barriers, raises critical questions about the accessibility and cultural fit of imported CEFR-aligned textbooks.

Against this backdrop, the present review examines three key strands of existing scholarship, which are CEFR reform in Malaysia, CEFR-aligned textbooks, and teacher adaptation practices, before identifying where the literature falls short in addressing the realities of indigenous education.

CEFR Reform in Malaysia

Several researchers have reported on the implementation of CEFR in Malaysia as part of the English Language Education Reform Roadmap (2015–2025), which was introduced to standardise English proficiency levels in line with international standards. This move reflected Malaysia's efforts to adopt global language benchmarks. Lee et al. (2022) stated that CEFR had been used to unify curriculum development, instruction, and assessment, supporting national goals for English language enhancement.

However, various studies highlighted challenges in its execution. Uri and Aziz (2018) found that many teachers lacked sufficient knowledge and awareness of CEFR during its early implementation, and Alih et al. (2021) added that while teachers generally welcomed the reform, their cognitive readiness depended on having adequate resources, training, and time. According to Aziz et al. (2018), although a cascade training model was employed to deliver professional development, the effectiveness of this approach varied significantly depending on context.

Concerns were also raised about the use of CEFR-aligned foreign textbooks. Yahaya and Wong (2024) reported that these materials often introduced unfamiliar cultural content, requiring teachers to adapt them for local classroom use. Similarly, Shak et al. (2021) observed that while these textbooks promoted authentic language exposure, stakeholders questioned their cultural fit and the adequacy of the textbook selection process.

In terms of assessment alignment, Baharum et al. (2021) examined efforts by a Malaysian university to correlate local proficiency scores with CEFR levels. They found a weak to moderate positive correlation, suggesting that further refinement was needed to ensure consistency between CEFR-aligned assessments and local academic requirements.

CEFR-aligned textbooks: design, selection, localisation

Imported CEFR-aligned textbooks such as Super Minds, Get Smart Plus, and PULSE 2 remain central to Malaysia's English education reform (Shak et al., 2021). Concerns have been raised regarding cultural mismatches, lexical difficulty, and a lack of supplementary resources, all of which add to teachers' workload (Singh et al., 2024; Uri, 2023). Teachers often adapt or supplement textbook content to ensure relevance, but studies largely focus on urban or general rural contexts (Hadi & Shah, 2020; Yahaya & Wong, 2024).

What remains underexplored is how these textbooks function in indigenous classrooms where English is not the second but often the third or fourth language, as in the case of Semai learners. This context magnifies issues of linguistic accessibility and cultural dissonance, suggesting a significant research gap.

Rural and indigenous contexts

Existing research highlights that rural teachers adapt CEFR-aligned materials through simplification and contextual supplementation (Ma'mor et al., 2024; Nawai & Said, 2020). However, studies that specifically examine Orang Asli education are limited. Rosnon (2016) critiqued national policies for normalizing schooling practices that marginalize indigenous cultural and linguistic identities, but empirical evidence documenting

how Orang Asli learners experience CEFR textbooks is scarce. Similarly, Nor et al. (2011) investigated dropout prevention initiatives, but without specific focus on how language education policies impact indigenous literacy outcomes.

This lack of focus is striking given the systemic inequalities faced by Orang Asli communities, including lower literacy levels, reduced school attendance, and linguistic displacement. CEFR-aligned reforms, while ambitious, risk deepening these inequalities if not critically localized for indigenous learners. Few studies to date have systematically explored the adaptations teachers employ in Semai or other Orang Asli-majority schools to negotiate the cultural and linguistic gaps in imported materials.

Teacher adaptation practices and pedagogy

Evidence increasingly points to teacher agency as a critical factor in the successful implementation of CEFR in Malaysian classrooms. Uri and Aziz (2018) observed that teachers often exercised autonomy through strategies such as pre-teaching vocabulary, simplifying tasks, and incorporating communicative activities to make CEFR-aligned materials more accessible. Furthermore, Alih et al. (2021) highlighted that despite systemic challenges, such as time constraints, material inadequacy, and student readiness, teachers demonstrated emotional and motivational readiness to adapt their practices, provided sufficient collective support and training were in place.

Similarly, Chong and Yamat (2021) found that many ESL teachers showed a high degree of flexibility and initiative in using CEFR-aligned resources, although they also noted that teacher readiness remained uneven and required reinforcement through professional development and contextual resource adaptation. Moreover, Azli and Akmar (2019) revealed that even with limited mastery of CEFR descriptors, teachers commonly relied on adaptable classroom tools like oral quizzes, group discussions, and mind maps to deliver CEFR-based instruction in ways that fit their students' needs. These findings affirm the importance of flexibility in classroom practice. Yet, while teachers' adaptive strategies in urban and rural contexts are fairly well documented, the literature rarely situates indigenous teachers' adaptations within broader discussions of CEFR reform.

While CEFR-aligned reforms in Malaysia have been extensively examined in urban and mainstream contexts, research on their implementation in indigenous education remains limited. Existing studies highlight challenges with teacher readiness, textbook suitability, and cultural alignment (Uri & Aziz, 2018; Shak et al., 2021; Yahaya & Wong, 2024), yet they rarely investigate how these issues play out in Orang Asli schools. The linguistic layering faced by Semai learners, where English is often a third or fourth language, further complicates textbook use, but has received little empirical attention.

Moreover, although teacher adaptation and agency are recognized as critical for CEFR success (Chong & Yamat, 2021; Azli & Akmar, 2019), there is scant documentation of the specific strategies indigenous teachers employ to navigate cultural dissonance, linguistic gaps, and infrastructural barriers. This lack of focus risks reinforcing educational inequalities by overlooking the realities of Orang Asli learners. Accordingly, there is a pressing need for studies that examine how CEFR-aligned textbooks are experienced, adapted, and perceived in indigenous settings, to inform more equitable and culturally responsive English language education policies in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study design, which is appropriate for exploring complex, context-dependent educational phenomena. Case study methodology allows for an in-depth investigation of teachers' experiences in selected Semai-majority schools, enabling a holistic understanding of how CEFR-aligned materials are interpreted, implemented, and adapted in indigenous settings.

The choice of a qualitative approach is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes the subjective construction of meaning and the contextual nature of knowledge. This approach is particularly

suitable for capturing the nuances of pedagogical adaptation and cultural responsiveness in marginalized educational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study was conducted in three national primary schools with a high population of Semai students located in Perak, Malaysia which are SK Batu 7, SK Batu 14, SK Ayer Denak. These schools were selected using purposive sampling based on their demographic relevance and willingness to participate. The participants included six English language teachers (four female and two male), as well as insights gathered from a Tok Batin (village leader) and his family, which helped contextualize the community's perspectives. Teachers had a range of 5 to 20 years of teaching experience and were all actively involved in the use of CEFR-aligned textbooks such as 'Super Minds' and 'Get Smart'.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face at the respective school sites. Each session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Interview prompts focused on three core areas:

1. Implementation challenges of CEFR-aligned textbooks,
2. Cultural and linguistic mismatches encountered in the classroom, and
3. Adaptation strategies adopted to enhance learner engagement and understanding.

In addition, informal dialogues with a Tok Batin and his family provided contextual insights into the Semai learners' linguistic and cultural environment.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved several stages:

1. Familiarization – All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times to capture initial impressions.
2. Initial Coding – An inductive coding approach was applied. Segments of text were coded line by line, focusing on recurring issues related to language barriers, cultural content, teaching practices, and perceptions of CEFR materials. Codes such as “cultural disconnect”, “translation practices”, and “digital divide” were created.
3. Theme Development – Codes were grouped into broader categories. For example, codes on “foreign textbook references” and “lack of local relevance” were combined under the theme Cultural Disconnect. Similarly, “translation into Semai” and “repetition strategies” were grouped under Cross-Linguistic Adaptation.
4. Review and Refinement – Themes were compared across schools to ensure consistency and reliability. Iterative comparison was used to collapse overlapping codes and sharpen distinctions between themes.
5. Finalization – Seven major themes were established, aligned with the research questions. Representative verbatim quotes were selected to ensure participants' voices remained central.

Additionally, given the interpretivist paradigm, researcher reflexivity was integral. Several steps were taken to mitigate bias:

1. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout data collection and analysis, allowing the researchers to record assumptions and monitor how their positionality (as non-Orang Asli academics) could shape interpretations.
2. Peer debriefing was conducted with two colleagues not directly involved in the study, who reviewed coding decisions and challenged potential over-interpretations.
3. Member checking was carried out informally with two participating teachers, who confirmed the accuracy of selected transcripts and interpretations.
4. Triangulation was applied by integrating teacher interviews with contextual insights from the Tok Batin, enhancing credibility through multiple perspectives.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant education authorities. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms were used instead of the participant's full names. Sensitive cultural references were handled with care to respect the community's identity and values.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Research Question 1: What challenges do teachers face when implementing CEFR-aligned English textbooks in Orang Asli (Semai) primary schools?

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed seven major themes: (1) English as a third or fourth language, (2) cultural disconnect in textbook content, (3) misalignment with proficiency levels, (4) technological and infrastructure barriers, (5) lack of culturally responsive resources, (6) learning pace and retention issues, and (7) assessment and streaming challenges. Verbatim excerpts from the interviews are provided to substantiate each theme.

English as a Third or Fourth Language

Teachers unanimously emphasized that English is not a second language for Orang Asli (Semai) pupils, but often the third or even fourth language after Semai and Malay. This linguistic layering compounds the difficulty of acquiring English literacy.

Teacher Maudy explained, "Even second language *pun dia orang struggle... BI tu lagi orang kata* is a burden" ["Even with the second language they struggle... as for English, people say it's even more of a burden."]. Similarly, Teacher Arini emphasized, "English is like a foreign language... it's useless for them" Teacher Noah also noted, "Some of them actually consider English as the fourth language because of dialect interference"

Cultural Disconnect in Textbook Content

The CEFR textbooks, adapted from Western or urban contexts, are culturally irrelevant to the lived experiences of Semai students. Teacher Vernie commented, "What they put in the textbook involves maybe Europe, US, even Australia. Nothing about Orang Asli". Teacher Arini supported this, stating, "*Nak imagine salji pun tak dapat... ABC pun ada budak yang tak tahu*" ["They can't even imagine snow... some kids don't even know what ABC is."]. Teacher Biru added, "Every item in the textbook... they are not really familiar with"

Not only that but teachers frequently need to replace textbook content with materials rooted in local culture to enhance engagement. Teacher Maudy explained, "I talked about durian... even the lazy ones paid attention". Teacher Noah emphasized the need for "relatable" materials: "Content... not related to them... so teachers must modify and come up with something fun"

Misalignment with Proficiency Levels

The difficulty of CEFR materials exceeds students' proficiency levels, making them demotivating and inaccessible. Teacher Maudy shared, "*Level dia orang is too advanced... even Jabatan lain pun bagi tahu supaya kita level down*" ["Their level is too advanced... even other [teaching] departments told us to level it down."]. Teacher Biru revealed, "Even for advance class, there is still a lot of knowledge gap... I have to make my own questions because it's too hard".

Technological and Infrastructure Barriers

Digital learning materials tied to CEFR implementation are inaccessible due to poverty and poor connectivity. During the pandemic, students lacked online access. Teacher Vernie shared, "Even RM5 top-up pun they couldn't afford... their devices don't support online learning". Teacher Arini added that this led to a full reset in basic skills upon return to school.

Learning Pace and Retention Issues

Semai pupils struggle with vocabulary retention and often forget lessons quickly. "I have to repeat the same word ten times... they think it's new every time," said Teacher Maudy. Teacher Vernie added, "Here I teach 10 times, they don't realize it's the same thing... in urban schools, 3 days is enough".

Assessment and Streaming Challenges

Teachers must juggle multiple assessment systems and intervention programs, often within a single classroom. Teacher Arini described, "We have to follow both syllabus and special modules like PLAN and RI... it's exhausting". In the context of Malaysian primary schools, especially rural or Orang Asli schools, PLAN and RI are support or remedial modules that run alongside the national CEFR-aligned English syllabus. Additionally, she noted, "Students who score TP3 are very rare; most remain at TP1 or TP2" TP here refers to TP (*Tahap Penguasaan*), which is Malaysia's Performance Standards system under the *Pentaksiran Bilik Darjah* (PBD) [In-class assessments]. The statement means that most students are performing at the lowest levels of achievement (TP1 or TP2), where they can only show very limited or basic understanding. Very few manage to reach TP3, which indicates satisfactory mastery. In short, it shows that most students are struggling and not meeting the expected learning standards.

The findings indicate a profound disconnect between the CEFR-aligned curriculum and the linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic realities of Orang Asli (Semai) learners. Teachers are left to bridge this gap with their own resources, creativity, and perseverance. These challenges necessitate a re-evaluation of curriculum design and textbook selection for indigenous learners to ensure equitable and meaningful English education.

Research Question 2: How do teachers adapt CEFR materials to align with the linguistic and cultural contexts of Semai students?

In response to the challenges, teachers reported actively adapting CEFR materials to make them more relevant and accessible to their Semai learners. This theme yielded several distinct strategies: (1) Localized content creation, (2) Simplified and visual scaffolding, (3) Cross-linguistic translation and repetition, and (4) Non-textbook-based storytelling and oral practices.

Localized Content Creation

To ensure engagement, teachers frequently replaced textbook examples with locally known items or experiences. Teacher Maudy noted, "*Saya guna contoh makanan macam durian atau tempat di kampung. Bila cakap pasal benda yang dekat dengan mereka, baru mereka buka mulut*" ["I use examples like food such as durian or places in the village. When I talk about things close to them, only then do they start to speak up."] Teacher Noah added, "I'll change the scenario to relate to the jungle, the river, or family situations they know. Only then do they respond."

Simplified and Visual Scaffolding

Teachers also adapted lesson materials by simplifying vocabulary and increasing the use of visual aids. Teacher Arini said, "*I draw everything on the board or show pictures. Kalau ikut buku semata-mata, mereka terus diam.*" ["I draw everything on the board or show pictures. If I just follow the textbook, they immediately go silent."] Teacher Biru shared, "I prepare flashcards, hand-drawn items, even props... because textbook visuals are too foreign for them."

Cross-Linguistic Translation and Repetition

Multilingual adaptation is also vital. Teachers often translate content into Malay or Semai and repeat key phrases multiple times.

Teacher Vernie stated, "*Saya ajar dalam BI, tapi ulang dalam BM dan kadang-kadang Semai juga. Kalau tidak, semua blur.*" ["I teach in English, but I repeat in Malay and sometimes in Semai too. Otherwise, they're

all confused."]. Teacher Maudy echoed this: "*Kena ulang banyak kali, kadang saya rasa macam robot. Tapi itu cara mereka tangkap perlahan-lahan.*" ["I have to repeat many times, sometimes I feel like a robot. But that's how they slowly grasp it."]

Non-Textbook-Based Storytelling and Oral Practices

Teachers use storytelling and song-based methods rooted in oral tradition to teach vocabulary and structures. Teacher Noah mentioned, "*Kadang saya cerita kisah kampung... lepas tu masukkan perkataan English sikit-sikit. Baru mereka rasa seronok belajar.*" ["Sometimes I tell village stories... then I slip in English words little by little. That's when they start to enjoy learning." Teacher Arini also used this method: "*Lagu rakyat atau irama tempatan saya ubah suai dan masukkan perkataan Bahasa Inggeris. Mereka ikut nyanyi.*" ["I adapt folk songs or local tunes and insert English words. They sing along."]

The findings demonstrate that teachers are not passive recipients of top-down curricular reforms but are actively engaged in adapting CEFR materials to suit the unique linguistic and cultural needs of their Semai learners. Through culturally responsive teaching strategies, visual aids, oral traditions, and multilingual scaffolding, these educators navigate systemic limitations to deliver meaningful language instruction. These adaptations highlight the importance of context-sensitive textbook design and teacher autonomy in indigenous education.

Research Question 3: To what extent do teachers perceive CEFR-aligned textbooks as effective in supporting English literacy development among Orang Asli learners?

The findings reveal a predominant view that the textbooks, while theoretically sound, are largely ineffective without adaptation due to cultural mismatch, linguistic misalignment, and motivational issues. Teachers' responses indicate that effectiveness is conditional rather than inherent.

Perceived Limitations of CEFR Textbooks

Most teachers expressed scepticism about the direct effectiveness of CEFR-aligned materials in their current form. Teacher Arini remarked, "It's not working... they don't even get the basics from it". She continued, "When the book says, 'match the adjective', some can't even read the word 'big'." Teacher Vernie pointed out, "Maybe for urban kids, yes. But here, it's not effective unless we change it. On its own, it's too foreign". Similarly, Teacher Biru stated, "The objective is okay... but the way it is presented doesn't match our kids' ability".

Conditional Usefulness with Modification

Despite the criticism, several teachers acknowledged that the CEFR textbooks offer structure and progression, but only if adapted. Teacher Maudy said that "I don't reject it entirely. The themes can be useful, but we need to modify. Otherwise, *tak masuk akal* [it would't make sense]". Teacher Noah added, "It's like a base. We build from it. Without that effort, the textbook won't work here".

Need for Localized Alternatives

Many teachers suggested that a more effective approach would be to redesign CEFR-aligned materials specifically for Orang Asli contexts. Teacher Arini remarked that "we need a book about them, about their kampung, their games, their food." Teacher Vernie echoed this sentiment: "Put their stories inside, then maybe they'll care to read".

Teachers overwhelmingly perceive CEFR-aligned textbooks as ineffective in their unmodified form for promoting English literacy among Semai learners. Their value lies in how well teachers can adapt them, not in the textbook alone. The findings call for a re-evaluation of material design that considers the cultural, linguistic, and developmental realities of indigenous learners.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Discussion

The implementation of CEFR-aligned English textbooks in Malaysia has been widely acknowledged as a significant reform aimed at elevating English language education to international standards. However, consistent with previous studies, this research highlights the persistent challenges teachers face in rural and indigenous contexts. These include linguistic barriers, cultural mismatches, and infrastructural limitations. Teachers in Semai-majority schools reiterated that English is not the second, but often the third or fourth language after Bahasa Semai, Bahasa Melayu, and sometimes local dialects, making CEFR descriptors and expectations particularly difficult to achieve (Kaur & Jian, 2022; Uri, 2023). Similarly, as reported elsewhere, the cultural content of imported textbooks such as *Super Minds*, *Get Smart Plus*, and *PULSE 2* appeared foreign to students, with references to snow, Western holidays, and urban lifestyles failing to resonate with indigenous learners (Yahaya & Wong, 2024; Katawazai et al., 2022). Infrastructural constraints further exacerbated these challenges; limited digital devices and poor internet connectivity during pandemic-related closures left many Semai pupils unable to engage with CEFR-based online lessons (Singh et al., 2024; Alih et al., 2021). These findings confirm well-documented concerns in the literature about the cultural and logistical difficulties of implementing CEFR-aligned materials in underserved Malaysian classrooms.

While this study affirms well-documented challenges in implementing the CEFR in Malaysia, it also extends current understanding in important ways. First, it reframes the linguistic challenge more precisely: rather than viewing CEFR implementation purely through a second-language acquisition lens, the findings suggest that for many Orang Asli pupils, English is in fact a third or even fourth language. Teachers noted that these students must first develop literacy in Semai and Malay before they can meaningfully engage with English, creating a multilingual sequencing process that is not captured by CEFR's linear L1–L2 progression model (Jamain & Jamaludin, 2023, Savski, 2021). This multilingual reality underscores the need for more flexible and inclusive benchmarks that accommodate complex linguistic repertoires, especially in culturally and linguistically diverse settings such as rural and Indigenous communities. Current CEFR descriptors risk marginalizing these learners by not accounting for the cumulative cognitive and linguistic load they face (Afip et al., 2019). As such, this study contributes a critical perspective to ongoing debates about the suitability of CEFR-aligned curricula in multilingual, multicultural contexts like Malaysia.

Second, the study provides new insights into teacher agency, particularly in culturally diverse and linguistically marginalized settings. While earlier research often describes teacher adaptation using general terms like “simplification” or “contextualisation,” this study documents specific, culturally grounded pedagogical strategies. For example, Orang Asli teachers reported embedding English vocabulary into Semai folk songs, adapting local storytelling practices, and referencing culturally familiar items like durian in lessons. These strategies not only foster learner engagement but also function as tools for preserving indigenous knowledge and identity (Idrus, Hussin, & Gulca, 2023; Embong et al., 2020). In this way, teachers assume dual roles as curriculum implementers and cultural mediators, highlighting a form of grassroots curriculum design rooted in indigenous epistemologies. This reframing positions teacher adaptation as an act of creative pedagogy and cultural preservation, expanding prevailing notions of teacher agency beyond mere compliance or resistance to systemic reforms (Ganapathy, Che Lah, & Phan, 2022).

Third, this study nuances the debate on textbook suitability by showing that CEFR-aligned materials are not entirely rejected by teachers but are perceived as conditionally useful. While many educators criticized these textbooks for being linguistically advanced and culturally misaligned with students' realities, they also acknowledged their structured progression and communicative themes as potentially valuable foundations, if adapted with sufficient scaffolding and local contextualization (Uri & Abdul Aziz, 2024; Kaur & Jian, 2022; Bakir & Aziz, 2022). This complicates the simple binary of textbook acceptance versus rejection and instead highlights the contingent value of these resources.

Finally, the findings bring attention to deeper policy–practice tensions and their implications for educational equity. While the adaptability and creativity of teachers represent a strength, the lack of institutional support for contextualising CEFR-aligned curricula places an undue burden on educators in underserved areas (Alih et

al., 2021; Panchadcharam & Nasir, 2025). Without systemic reforms that embed cultural and linguistic responsiveness into curriculum design, CEFR reforms may unintentionally widen existing inequalities. Thus, while such policies aim to standardize English proficiency, they risk marginalising indigenous learners unless accompanied by comprehensive structural support.

Recommendations

Several key recommendations are proposed to enhance the implementation of CEFR-aligned English textbooks in Orang Asli (Semai) primary school. First, localisation of CEFR materials is recommended. Imported textbooks should be supplemented with culturally relevant examples that reflect the students' local environment. The Ministry of Education (MoE) should commission the development of supplementary booklets or local content packs to accompany CEFR-aligned textbooks. These could feature Semai-themed stories, dialogues, and vocabulary lists. For example, instead of passages about snow or European festivals, texts could highlight rainforest ecology, fruit harvesting, or local cultural practices, making lessons relatable without discarding CEFR progression. Rosnon (2016) believed that including familiar references such as local foods, festivals, and daily practices would make the learning experience more meaningful and engaging for indigenous learners, who often struggle to relate to the standardised European-centric content.

Second, teacher professional development is crucial to the success of CEFR implementation. It is believed that many teachers lacked the necessary training and confidence to effectively use CEFR-aligned resources in low-proficiency and multilingual classrooms. Thus, it is proposed that targeted workshops that focus on differentiated instruction, translanguaging, and integrating cultural elements from the Semai community into lessons. For instance, existing CEFR training should be expanded to include modules on translanguaging, oral tradition pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching. Moreover, District Education Offices (PPD) could pilot workshops in Semai-majority schools, equipping teachers with strategies to integrate Malay and Semai as scaffolds while maintaining English learning goals. Khair and Shah (2021) and Yasin and Yamat (2021) argued that such training would empower teachers to adapt materials more effectively.

Third, since many indigenous students face difficulties with the abstract nature of CEFR textbooks, it is suggested that visual aids, storytelling techniques, and digital tools to be added to these books. They could improve comprehension and memory retention, especially among learners with limited literacy skills. Not only that but Krishnasamy (2017) mentioned that visual and multimodal learning strategies would bridge the cognitive gap between learners' experiences and textbook content. On top of that, to overcome connectivity barriers, MoE could develop offline-compatible digital resources (e.g., CEFR lessons preloaded on tablets or USB drives). These should include Semai-language voiceovers and illustrations rooted in local contexts, ensuring students have access regardless of internet availability.

Fourth, in terms of policy, it was reported that while CEFR offers a structured framework for language learning, greater flexibility is required to accommodate the unique realities of indigenous education. Therefore, it is recommended to the Ministry of Education (MoE) to consider designing complementary teaching modules that align better with Orang Asli learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In addition, MoE curriculum units should establish indigenous advisory panels involving Orang Asli teachers, Tok Batin (village leaders), and NGOs. These panels would participate in textbook review cycles, ensuring that indigenous voices shape both design and evaluation of CEFR-aligned materials. Jamain and Jamaludin (2023) explained that rigid adherence to CEFR without contextual adjustment risks marginalising these communities further.

Finally, the importance of involving local communities in the learning process must be emphasized. It is believed that the active participation of Tok Batin (village leaders), parents, and community members could significantly enhance students' motivation and sense of belonging. The MoE could support family literacy programs in Semai communities, where parents and local leaders participate in bilingual storytelling or village-based vocabulary games. Such initiatives would reinforce classroom learning while validating Semai cultural identity in the school environment. Nor et al. (2011) argued that a collaborative approach fosters stronger home-school connections and makes language learning more socially relevant and sustainable.

In sum, this study contributes fresh insights by documenting the Semai case as more than an example of “implementation difficulty.” It shows how multilingual layering, indigenous cultural integration, and conditional perceptions of CEFR textbooks reshape our understanding of reform in marginalized contexts. The concrete recommendations outlined here provide pathways for policymakers and practitioners to ensure that CEFR reforms do not simply reproduce inequities but instead foster equitable, culturally responsive English literacy development for Orang Asli learners.

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