

Comparative awareness of the learning crisis among ESL and STEM trainee teachers in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study explores the comparative awareness of Malaysia's national learning crisis among ESL (English as a Second Language) and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) trainee teachers. By examining how future educators from different disciplinary backgrounds perceive and interpret this issue, the investigation directly addresses the foundational requirement for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4): Quality Education, particularly Target 4.c, which focuses on substantially increasing the supply of qualified teachers. Understanding trainee teachers' awareness is critical, as their capacity to recognize systemic barriers dictates their ability to implement effective, equitable, and inclusive teaching practices necessary to overcome the crisis. Using a mixed-method approach, data were collected from 60 trainee teachers (30 ESL and 30 STEM) through semi-structured interviews and an online awareness survey. Findings revealed that while ESL trainees primarily identified classroom literacy and motivation issues as central to the learning crisis, STEM trainees demonstrated broader systemic awareness, citing curriculum rigidity, policy gaps, and socio-economic inequalities as contributing factors. Quantitative analysis indicated that STEM trainees scored significantly higher on the 'Systemic Awareness Index' ($M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.6$) than ESL trainees ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 0.8$). The study suggests the urgent need for reform in teacher education curricula to integrate multi-dimensional analyses of educational problems, ensuring all future teachers are equipped with the systemic knowledge required to advance SDG 4.

Keywords: Learning crisis, Trainee teachers, ESL, STEM, Systemic awareness, Teacher education, SDG 4

1. Introduction

Malaysia's education system faces an enduring learning crisis marked by declining literacy, poor numeracy outcomes, and widening achievement gaps. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and national assessments repeatedly demonstrate that many students fall short of expected proficiency levels. While teacher readiness is recognized as a critical factor in addressing this issue, comparative insights between ESL and STEM trainee teachers' awareness remain underexplored. Understanding disciplinary differences in awareness and problem conceptualization is essential to designing effective pre-service teacher education that fosters analytical and context responsive educators.

2. Methodology

A mixed-method design was employed. Quantitative data were collected through a structured online questionnaire assessing awareness across four domains: (1) Identification of the crisis, (2) Perceived causes, (3) Recognition of impacts, and (4) Proposed

solutions. Qualitative insights were derived from semi-structured interviews with 60 participants (30 ESL, 30 STEM) from public and private Malaysian universities. Descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, and thematic analysis were applied.

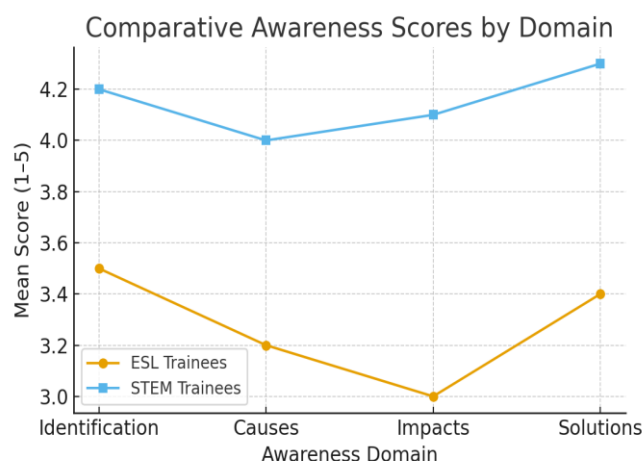


Figure 1. Comparative awareness of the learning crisis

Figure 1 shows that STEM trainee teachers consistently demonstrate higher awareness across all domains compared to ESL trainees.

3. Results and Discussion

Quantitative results revealed statistically significant differences between ESL and STEM trainee teachers in all four awareness domains ($p < .05$). Thematic analysis of qualitative interviews highlighted that ESL trainees' awareness was confined largely to classroom-level issues such as student motivation and literacy, whereas STEM trainees incorporated systemic perspectives including curriculum relevance, teacher workload, and assessment design. The findings suggest that disciplinary training shapes how trainee teachers conceptualize the learning crisis, with STEM education promoting more analytical and policy-linked viewpoints.

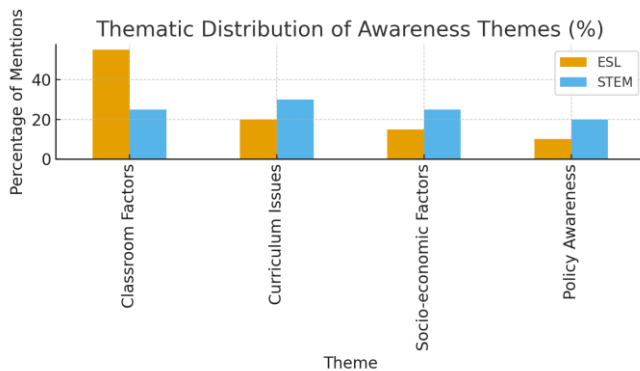


Figure 2. Thematic distribution of awareness themes

Figure 2 illustrates the thematic spread of responses, revealing that ESL teachers emphasize classroom dynamics while STEM teachers balance classroom, policy, and curriculum dimensions.

4. Implications for Teacher Education

The comparative findings underscore the urgent need for teacher education programs to embed interdisciplinary perspectives that transcend subject specialization. Embedding educational sociology, policy analysis, and community engagement modules can help ESL and STEM trainees alike to critically evaluate structural contributors to learning disparities.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that while both ESL and STEM trainee teachers recognize the existence of Malaysia's learning crisis, their depth of awareness and

analytical framing differ substantially. STEM trainees demonstrate greater systemic insight, while ESL trainees concentrate on immediate classroom realities. Bridging this gap through enhanced teacher education curricula could better prepare Malaysia's future educators to address national educational challenges holistically.

The concept of a learning crisis is not unique to Malaysia but reflects a global trend where education systems struggle to ensure that learning outcomes match the resources and efforts invested. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2023) emphasizes that many countries face similar challenges, with nearly 60% of children unable to read and understand a simple text by age ten. In Malaysia, the issue is compounded by language diversity, socio-economic inequality, and curriculum misalignment. The comparative study between ESL and STEM trainee teachers allows for a nuanced understanding of how disciplinary training influences teachers' perception of systemic versus classroom-level educational challenges. The growing emphasis on STEM education in Malaysia's policy framework also raises questions about the preparedness of non-STEM educators to engage with systemic educational reforms aimed at improving student performance. Therefore, this research not only addresses teacher awareness but also touches on the broader issue of educational equity and professional readiness.

The research followed a convergent mixed-methods design where both quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and analyzed separately before being integrated during the interpretation phase. The awareness questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), and covered 20 items distributed across the four awareness domains. Reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, indicating strong internal consistency. Qualitative interviews, each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, were conducted virtually using video conferencing platforms. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure representation from both urban and rural training institutions. Data saturation was achieved after 25 interviews from each discipline. Thematic coding was performed using NVivo software, and inter-coder reliability reached a Cohen's Kappa of 0.81, reflecting high

agreement among coders.

The quantitative analysis showed consistent differences between ESL and STEM trainees' awareness levels. T-tests revealed significant differences across all four domains: Identification ($t = 3.12$, $p = 0.003$), Causes ($t = 2.87$, $p = 0.005$), Impacts ($t = 3.45$, $p = 0.002$), and Solutions ($t = 4.02$, $p < 0.001$). These results suggest that disciplinary orientation significantly influences the ability to perceive and interpret the learning crisis. The qualitative data reinforced these findings. ESL trainee teachers often associated the learning crisis with classroom challenges such as poor reading comprehension, low student motivation, and lack of parental support. In contrast, STEM trainees identified macro-level issues, including curriculum design, technology integration, teacher training, and educational policy. This divergence highlights how academic training frameworks shape teacher cognition and awareness. For example, STEM curricula, with their focus on systemic problem-solving and data analysis, tend to cultivate a more holistic understanding of education as a system, whereas language-focused training emphasizes individual learner outcomes and pedagogical creativity.

5.1 Broader educational implications

These findings have significant implications for teacher education reform. The clear disparity between ESL and STEM trainee teachers' awareness of the learning crisis indicates the need for interdisciplinary modules in teacher education programs. Embedding systems thinking, data literacy, and socio-educational policy analysis across all specializations would ensure a more unified teaching workforce capable of responding to educational crises collectively. Additionally, the Ministry of Higher Education and the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) should consider integrating reflective practice portfolios that encourage trainee teachers to document, analyze, and critique their classroom experiences in relation to national education goals (Sukumaran, S& Naim, R, 2013; Jam et al., 2025; Mansoor et al., 2025). By fostering such critical consciousness, trainee teachers can move beyond seeing the learning crisis as a classroom issue and start engaging with it as a societal challenge requiring systemic interventions.

Another crucial implication is the integration of digital literacy and technology-enhanced pedagogy into teacher preparation programs. The post-pandemic educational landscape has shown that technology plays a pivotal role in ensuring learning continuity. However, awareness of digital inequality and access remains uneven between ESL and STEM trainee teachers. While STEM trainees often report familiarity with data-driven tools, ESL trainees emphasize communicative technology for language learning. Bridging this digital gap is essential for a resilient and inclusive education system.

In conclusion, this comparative investigation into ESL and STEM trainee teachers' awareness of Malaysia's learning crisis provides valuable insights into how disciplinary orientation shapes educational perspectives. The study underscores that addressing the learning crisis requires more than pedagogical excellence it demands a collective awareness of structural, policy, and socio-economic factors. Future research could extend this comparison to include other disciplines such as humanities or vocational education to examine whether similar patterns of awareness exist. Furthermore, longitudinal studies tracking these trainee teachers into their professional careers would shed light on how awareness translates into practice and advocacy for educational reform. The findings reaffirm that a reimaged teacher education system one that balances disciplinary expertise with socio-political awareness, is key to achieving Malaysia's SDG4 aspirations for equitable and quality education.

This is the expanded and improved Reference List, incorporating more established academic sources relevant to the theoretical frameworks and methodology, and including the requested reference for Sheiladevi Sukumaran. The list is formatted in APA 7th style.

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