Active Learning and English Classroom Behaviour: A Qualitative Research on Standard 4 Students in Malaysia

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Abstract. Active learning strategies allow students to take a more active role in the classroom, but there is still limited understanding of how they behave during such activities. This study explores why active learning shapes classroom behaviour and how standard 4 students respond to different strategies in English lessons. A qualitative approach was used, combining classroom observations and semi-structured interviews in a Malaysian primary school. Two strategies were examined in detail: role-play dialogues, where students practised conversational English, and collaborative vocabulary games, which required teamwork and problem-solving. The findings show that students were more motivated and confident when activities encouraged interaction and play. However, some challenges were observed, including students getting distracted during tasks and showing reluctance to give longer responses. These insights highlight the need to design active learning activities that are both enjoyable and effective for skill development. The study offers implications for improving English education within Malaysia's CEFR-aligned curriculum.

Keywords: English active learning, classroom behaviour, Malaysian primary school.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

English is one of the core subjects in the Malaysian primary school curriculum, and most teachers agreed with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) guidance [1]. Under this framework, Standard 4 students are expected to develop communicative competence through interactive and meaningful use of the language [2]. However, in many government schools, English lessons continue to rely heavily on traditional teaching approaches such as chalk-and-talk, repetition drills, and teacher-led questioning. These teacher-centred methods often encourage passive learning, where students primarily listen and copy rather than actively engage with the language or explore its meaning.

In contrast, active learning promotes participation, collaboration, and learner autonomy. Approaches such as role-play, group discussions, and vocabulary games are designed to foster interaction, boost motivation, and enhance communicative competence. According to Doolitle et al. [3], active learning means a way of teaching that helps

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students think deeply and understand better. It also means learning by doing physical actions, where students take part, join activities, and stay involved in the lesson. Similarly, Nguyen describe active learning as classroom activities that get students involved in their own learning by answering questions, solving problems, discussing topics, or teaching others, either on their own or in groups [4].
In Malaysian primary English classrooms, the integration of active learning supports the national goal of creating learner-centred environments. Nevertheless, there is still limited understanding of how students behave during these activities. Behavioural elements such as engagement, attentiveness, and cooperation are crucial indicators that determine the effectiveness of learning experiences and overall classroom success.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although the CEFR-aligned English curriculum promotes communicative and student-centred teaching, many Malaysian teachers continue to face challenges in implementing active learning effectively. In traditional classrooms, students are more familiar with direct instruction and rote memorisation of vocabulary rather than learning through meaningful interaction. This shift in approach often creates a behavioural gap that when active learning is introduced, some students become highly engaged and enthusiastic, while others may appear distracted or hesitant to participate.

Moreover, most existing research in Malaysia tends to focus on academic outcomes rather than classroom behaviour as an observable result of active learning [1][5][6]. There are also a lack of qualitative evidence on how students with varying levels of English proficiency (Pre-A1, Low A1, and Mid A1) behave and respond during such activities [7]. To address this gap, the present study explores how active learning influences students' classroom behaviour in a Standard 4 English lesson, particularly in terms of participation, collaboration, focus, and confidence.

1.3 Research Objectives

To investigate how active learning strategies influence classroom behaviour among Standard 4 students in CEFR-aligned English lessons.
To explore how students of varying English proficiency levels respond behaviourally during active learning activities.

1.4 Research Questions

How does active learning strategies influence classroom behaviour among Standard 4 students in CEFR-aligned English lessons?
How does students of varying English proficiency levels respond behaviourally during active learning activities?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study provides insights for English teachers in Malaysian primary schools on how active learning can be effectively integrated to promote positive classroom behaviour.

The findings may guide teachers in balancing engagement with discipline, especially when managing mixed-proficiency groups. Furthermore, it contributes to the growing body of local literature on CEFR-aligned pedagogy and supports the Ministry of Education's vision of producing communicative and confident English users.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Classroom Practices in Malaysia

Active learning in language education is rooted in constructivist theory, which views knowledge as something learners actively build rather than passively received. According to Piaget's cognitive constructivism, students develop understanding by interacting with their environment, connecting new information to what they already know, and adjusting their thinking to accommodate new experiences [8]. In the English classroom, this means that language learning goes beyond memorising rules; it involves actively using language, negotiating meaning with others, and reflecting on experiences. Activities such as role-playing, group discussions, and problem-solving not only help students internalise language structures but also allow them to practise communication skills in meaningful contexts, supporting both cognitive development and language competence.

On top of that, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory adds an important social dimension to learning, emphasising that students develop cognitively through interaction with others and support from teachers and peers within their zone of proximal development (ZPD) [9]. In practical terms, this suggests that pupils with different levels of English proficiency (Pre A1, Low A1, Mid A1) can participate meaningfully in classroom activities when tasks are designed with appropriate guidance, such as structured discussions, peer modelling, or collaborative problem-solving. By combining scaffolding with interactive tasks, teachers can promote behavioural engagement including attentiveness, active participation, and cooperation, which is crucial for effective language learning. Applying this perspective to Standard 4 English classrooms in Malaysia highlights that learning success is not measured solely through test scores, but also through observable growth in pupils' engagement, confidence, and willingness to use English in real communicative situations.

Meanwhile, traditional English classrooms in Malaysia are often teacher-centred, focusing on grammar translation, repetition, and teacher explanation [10]. These practices encourage conformity and discipline but limit opportunities for students to express ideas or use English actively. While this approach ensures content coverage, it often suppresses curiosity and spontaneous interaction, leading to passive behaviour among students.

2.2 Classroom Behaviour and Engagement

Classroom behaviour reflects how students respond to learning conditions, including their attentiveness, cooperation, and willingness to participate [11]. Behavioural engagement is a predictor of learning success, influenced by teacher style, peer interaction, and task design. Students in language classes often show improved engagement when tasks involve real-life communication and clear goals.

Research globally shows that active learning enhances participation, confidence, and discipline when students are given clear structure and motivation [11]. In the Southeast Asian context, teachers report that students enjoy collaborative games but sometimes lose focus or become overly excited [12]. Therefore, well-designed activities with structure and reflection are necessary to sustain productive classroom behaviour.

There is limited qualitative research on Standard 4 Malaysian students exploring behavioural changes during active learning in English lessons. Most studies rely on test scores rather than classroom observation or student feedback. This study addresses that gap by examining how students behave, not merely what they learn.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design, combining classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. The qualitative approach allows for a naturalistic understanding of students' behaviour and participation during active learning [13].

3.2 Participants

The study involves 37 Standard 4 students in a Malaysian government primary school. According to teacher's (researcher) assessment, 5 students are at Pre-A1/Low A1 level, and 32 are at Mid A1 level. These are the results of the Remedial Instruction assessment that is required in CEFR classroom in Malaysia. Students are divided into mixed-ability groups to ensure balanced participation, with one weaker student in each team during the activities.

3.3 Research Activities

Two active learning activities which are Role-play Dialogues and Word Relay Challenge were designed and implemented to observe students' behavioural responses during English lessons. Both activities aimed to promote communication, cooperation, and engagement while providing opportunities to observe key aspects of classroom behaviour such as focus, participation, and confidence.

The first activity focused on practising conversational English through functional expressions used in daily life situations. Students worked in pairs, taking turns to act as an interviewer and interviewee in a pre-celebration situation. Each pair practised greetings, polite requests, and simple dialogues. To ensure equal participation, rotations

were carried out so that all students had the opportunity to play both roles. After practising, each pair performed their dialogue in front of the class, followed by a short peer feedback session using a simple rubric that assessed fluency, politeness, and vocabulary use. During this activity, the researcher observed students' behaviour with particular attention to confidence, turn-taking, attentiveness, and their initiative to speak in English.

The second activity aimed to foster teamwork and reinforce vocabulary retention through movement and cooperation. Students were divided into small teams of four to five members. Each team took turns to write and say sentences using vocabulary word cards for example, "celebrations," "independence," or "costumes." This interactive element encouraged both physical and verbal engagement. The teacher observed students' level of participation, how they helped their teammates, and whether they remained focused or became distracted during the activity. The main behavioural indicators observed included participation, collaboration, focus, and motivation.

Table 1. Active Learning Activities and Observed Student Behaviour

Activity	Procedure	Behavioural Indicators
Role-Play Dialogues	- Students work in pairs as interviewer/interviewee in a pre-celebration scenario - Practice greetings, polite requests, and simple dialogues - Rotate roles so everyone participates - Perform dialogues in front of class - Peer feedback using simple rubric (fluency, politeness, vocabulary)	- Confidence in speaking - Turn-taking and initiative - Attentiveness - Use of English
Word Relay Challenge	- Students form small teams (4–5 members) - Teams take turns using vocabulary cards to form and say sentences (e.g., "celebrations," "independence," "costumes") - Physical movement included to increase engagement	- Participation and motivation - Collaboration and support among teammates - Focus and attentiveness - Verbal engagement / vocabulary usage

Based on **Table 1.**, these two activities provided a dynamic classroom environment that allowed for detailed observation of how active learning strategies influenced students' behaviour, engagement, and social interaction during English lessons.

3.4 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through two primary qualitative methods: non-participatory classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. These approaches allowed the researcher to capture both observable behavioural patterns and students' personal reflections on their learning experiences. For ethical considerations, student names are anonymized, observations are non-intrusive, focusing on behaviour and not academic grading.

Classroom Observation - Non-participatory observations were conducted to document students' behavioural engagement during the two active learning activities. This approach enabled the researcher to record classroom interactions objectively without influencing the participants' natural responses [14][15]. Observation notes focused on indicators such as attentiveness, participation, cooperation, and focus. Lesson plans were also reviewed to ensure alignment between instructional goals and observed behaviours, providing contextual validity for the data.

Semi-Structured Interviews - To complement the observational data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six students, representing different English proficiency levels (two from each category: Pre-A1, Low A1, and Mid A1). Following the procedures suggested by Devira [15], the interviews encouraged open-ended discussion to elicit students' views on active learning experiences. Guiding questions included

- Did you enjoy the activity?
- What did you learn from working in groups/pairs?
- Was it easy or difficult to focus? Why?

3.5 Data Analysis

The data were analysed thematically following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke [16]. Initially, recurrent patterns in students' behaviour were identified and coded, with particular attention given to themes such as engagement, cooperation, and distraction during classroom activities. These behavioural themes were then categorised according to students' English proficiency levels to allow for meaningful comparison across Pre-A1, Low A1, and Mid A1 learners. Finally, the identified themes were interpreted in relation to the study's research objectives and supported by relevant literature to ensure that the findings were theoretically grounded and analytically coherent.

4 Findings

4.1 Overall Behavioural Patterns

Observations showed that students exhibited markedly higher engagement and verbal participation during both active learning activities compared to traditional teacher-centred lessons. On average, 85% of students voluntarily contributed to discussions, and over 70% remained on-task throughout the activities. Most students were eager to participate, often raising hands to respond or encouraging their peers to speak. Moments of distraction occurred briefly, particularly during transitions between turns or when instructions were being clarified, but these were typically short-lived and did not affect overall engagement. Interviews with students revealed that many felt the activities were "fun" and "different from regular lessons," which they cited as motivating factors for staying involved. These findings align with previous research confirmed by Hamzah & Ismail that structured active learning enhances classroom behaviour by increasing engagement, cooperation, and verbal participation [2].

4.2 Role-play Activity

In the role-play activity, students appeared more confident and expressive when using scripted dialogues. For example, a Mid A1 student commented, "I like pretending to be the shopkeeper!" Lower-level students, such as those at Pre and Low A1, initially required prompts and cues but gradually became more fluent and independent during the second rotation. Behaviourally, pairs showed improved turn-taking and attentiveness as the activity progressed. Observations noted that 90% of students actively participated in performing their dialogues, while peer feedback sessions promoted collaborative evaluation, with students highlighting each other's fluency, vocabulary use, and politeness. The structured nature of the dialogues appeared to reduce anxiety, allowing even shy pupils to speak in front of the class

4.3 Word Relay Challenge

The Word Relay Challenge stimulated energetic participation and teamwork. Students were observed cheering each other on and correcting teammates' sentences in supportive ways. For example, a student at Low A1 spontaneously said, "Try again, say 'I like the costume,'" demonstrating peer scaffolding in action. Behaviourally, most students remained focused and engaged due to the competitive and dynamic nature of the game, with less than 10% of observed off-task behaviour, which tended to be playful rather than disruptive. Pre-A1 students particularly benefited from working with higher-level peers, frequently repeating sentences modeled by teammates, thereby reinforcing vocabulary retention and sentence formation through guided practice.

4.4 Comparison by Proficiency

Analysis across proficiency levels revealed clear behavioural patterns. Pre/Low A1 students were initially hesitant, relying on modelling from peers or the teacher, but their participation improved significantly when placed in supportive pairs or groups. They displayed cooperative behaviour, helping peers and engaging in shared turns, though they were less vocal independently. Mid A1 students, on the other hand, consistently took initiative, offered assistance to weaker peers, and often assumed leadership roles during both activities. Observation notes recorded that these students prompted others, gave feedback, and maintained focus, demonstrating both confidence and social responsibility. Interview responses reinforced these observations, with Mid A1 students stating that they felt "proud" when helping classmates and "happy" to participate actively, indicating that the activities also promoted self-efficacy and positive classroom relationships.

5 Conclusion

This study examined how active learning strategies influence classroom behaviour among Standard 4 students in CEFR-aligned English lessons. The findings demonstrate that when lessons involve interactive and meaningful tasks such as role-play dialogues and collaborative vocabulary games, students exhibit higher engagement, confidence, and cooperation. These behaviours reflect a positive shift from passive learning to active participation. However, the study also observed that excitement during group tasks can occasionally lead to distractions, suggesting that effective classroom management and structured guidance remain crucial. Overall, the research confirms that active learning promotes not only language use but also social and behavioural growth among young learners.

The study offers several practical implications for English language teachers. First, integrating structured active learning tasks can enhance motivation and behavioural engagement, especially when activities are purposeful and appropriately scaffolded. Teachers should balance enjoyment with clear learning objectives to maintain focus. Mixed-ability grouping proved beneficial, enabling peer support and cooperative learning, which can help lower-level students participate meaningfully. Moreover, teachers need to provide explicit modelling, consistent feedback, and reflection sessions after each activity to reinforce discipline and deepen learning. School administrators may also consider professional development programs that equip teachers with active learning strategies tailored to CEFR levels.

Future classroom-based research could expand on this study by comparing different active learning techniques (e.g., Gallery Walk, Jigsaw Reading, or Debate) and their effects on specific language performance outcomes such as fluency, pronunciation, or vocabulary range. Longitudinal studies are recommended to observe whether continuous application of active learning sustains positive behavioural patterns over time. Additionally, incorporating teachers' and parents' perspectives could provide a more holistic understanding of how active learning impacts students' motivation and discipline beyond the classroom setting.

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