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# **SPOKEN WORD POETRY AS AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD TO IMPROVE ESL LEARNERS' SPEAKING SKILLS**



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**ROSE SUZILA BINTI YAHAYA**



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## ABSTRACT

The main aim of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) as an alternative method to improve speaking skills among ESL learners. The study employed the explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. Purposive sampling was employed to select 196 respondents for the questionnaire survey and 6 participants for the focus group interviews. In the quasi-experimental phase, intact group sampling was used to assign students to experimental and control groups. Quantitative data were collected through surveys and speaking tests. The qualitative data were gathered via focus group interviews to explore participants' perceptions and experiences of SWP. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean scores) and inferential statistics (independent samples t-test) to compare the experimental and control groups. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to identify key patterns and themes in learners' perceptions. Quantitative findings revealed that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in speaking post-test scores ( $M = 15.36$ ,  $SD = 4.96$  vs.  $M = 11.42$ ,  $SD = 5.22$ ),  $t(88) = -3.67$ ,  $p < .001$ , demonstrating notable improvements in vocabulary use, pronunciation, and communicative confidence. Qualitative results highlighted that learners perceived SWP as engaging, expressive, and motivating, reporting increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and enhanced use of low-frequency words. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that SWP provides a learner-centered, psychologically supportive, and linguistically enriching method for improving ESL speaking proficiency. This study contributes to ESL pedagogy by presenting an innovative, creative instructional strategy that fosters learners' communicative competence and confidence, with potential applications in Malaysian classrooms and beyond.





## **SPOKEN WORD POETRY SEBAGAI KAEADAH ALTERNATIF UNTUK MENINGKATKAN KEMAHIRAN BERTUTUR DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR ESL**

### **ABSTRAK**

Tujuan utama kajian ini adalah untuk menilai keberkesanannya kaedah *Spoken Word Poetry* (SWP) sebagai pendekatan alternatif bagi meningkatkan kemahiran bertutur dalam kalangan pelajar ESL. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk kajian campuran berurutan penjelasan (*explanatory sequential mixed-methods design*). Pensampelan bertujuan digunakan untuk memilih responden bagi tinjauan soal selidik (196 responden) dan peserta bagi temu bual kumpulan fokus (6 peserta). Sementara itu, pensampelan kumpulan sedia ada digunakan dalam fasa kuasi-eksperimen untuk membahagikan pelajar kepada kumpulan eksperimen dan kumpulan kawalan (90 pelajar). Data kuantitatif dikumpulkan melalui soal selidik dan ujian bertutur, manakala data kualitatif diperoleh melalui temu bual kumpulan fokus untuk meneroka persepsi dan pengalaman pelajar terhadap SWP. Data kuantitatif dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif (skor min) dan statistik inferensi (*ujian-t sampel bebas*) bagi membandingkan kumpulan eksperimen dan kawalan. Data kualitatif pula dianalisis secara tematik untuk mengenal pasti corak dan tema utama dalam persepsi pelajar. Dapatkan kuantitatif menunjukkan bahawa kumpulan eksperimen mencatatkan skor ujian pasca bertutur yang lebih tinggi secara signifikan berbanding kumpulan kawalan ( $M = 15.36$ ,  $SP = 4.96$  berbanding  $M = 11.42$ ,  $SP = 5.22$ ),  $t(88) = -3.67$ ,  $p < .001$ . Ini menunjukkan peningkatan ketara dalam penggunaan perbendaharaan kata, sebutan, dan keyakinan berkomunikasi. Dapatkan kualitatif pula menonjolkan bahawa pelajar menganggap SWP sebagai pendekatan yang menarik, ekspresif, dan memotivasi, di samping melaporkan peningkatan keyakinan diri, pengurangan kebimbangan, serta penguasaan perbendaharaan kata jarang digunakan. Berdasarkan dapatkan ini, dapat disimpulkan bahawa SWP merupakan pendekatan pengajaran yang berpusatkan pelajar, menyokong aspek psikologi serta memperkayakan aspek linguistik dalam usaha meningkatkan kemahiran bertutur ESL. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada pedagogi ESL dengan memperkenalkan strategi pengajaran yang inovatif dan kreatif untuk memupuk kecekapan komunikatif serta keyakinan pelajar, dengan potensi aplikasi dalam bilik darjah di Malaysia dan di peringkat antarabangsa.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
ESA	Engage, Study and Activate Model
ESL	English as a Second Language
ITM	Immersion Teaching Model
L1	First Language
L2	Second Language
PPP	Presentation, Practice and Production
RQ	Research Question
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
SWP	Spoken Word Poetry
TBLT	Task Based Language Teaching



## LIST OF APPENDICES

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- B Questionnaire
- C Interview Protocol
- D Speaking Rubric
- E Sample Questions of Speaking Pre-Test and Post-Test
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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction



This chapter offers a comprehensive introduction to the study, organised into eight distinct sections. The study's background, which includes the speaking proficiency level of students in an ESL context, and an introduction to the Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) Method in connection with this study are covered in the first section. The subsequent section addresses speaking as a productive skill, the incorporation of poetry in teaching speaking skills, and the articulation of the research problem and rationale for this study. This is succeeded by the formulation of the study's research objectives, which subsequently emphasises the research questions. The importance of the study is subsequently justified, followed by a detailed description of the key conceptual terms utilised in this research. Additionally, this chapter outlines how the study extends beyond learner outcomes to include instructional insights, specifically addressing the pedagogical implications of implementing a Spoken



Word Poetry Speaking Template structured through the ADDIE instructional design model.

## 1.2 Background of Study

English, though officially recognized as a second language in Malaysia (Gill, 2002; Thang et al., 2011), plays a pivotal role in the national education system. Students are exposed to formal English instruction from the age of seven, beginning in primary school, and continuing through secondary education. While Bahasa Melayu remains the primary medium of instruction, English is endorsed in educational policies as the second language, reflecting its importance in both academic and professional domains (Jantmary & Melor, 2017).

Initiatives such as the PPSMI (Teaching of Science and Mathematics in English), launched in 2003, sought to elevate English proficiency by integrating it into content subjects. However, this program was discontinued in 2012 after a Ministry of Education study found that most teachers reverted to code-switching due to students' difficulty in comprehending complex concepts in English (Nadhirah, 2020). Despite this, some cohorts continued with English-medium instruction until completing Form 5 in 2014 (Darus, 2009).

The national English curriculum comprises six years at primary level and five years at secondary level, during which students undertake national assessments such as UPSR, PT3, and SPM. Since 2019, these exams have been replaced with school-based assessments emphasizing holistic learning (Huan, 2019). At the tertiary level, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) is required for university entry, underscoring the national focus on English proficiency (Ramiza Darmi, 2013).

Despite these structural efforts, spoken English remains a challenge among Malaysian learners. Many university students struggle to articulate ideas fluently despite scoring well in written exams. Scholars such as Tunku Mohani Tunku Mohtar (2015) and Yahaya, Madzlan, & Mohd (2021) attribute this to weak foundational skills, low vocabulary range, and minimal real-life practice in speaking. Leong & Ahmadi (2017) concur that speaking remains one of the most difficult language skills for L2 learners.

Contributing further to this issue is the interference from learners' first language (L1), which frequently distorts pronunciation and sentence structure (Aziz et al., 2021; Yahaya et al., 2021). Code-switching, although often employed for comfort, may inhibit consistent language development (Lee, 2010). Teachers are thus encouraged to reduce code-switching over time, fostering students' reliance on English in communication (Hie & Phan, 2008).

Empirical studies highlight vocabulary and grammatical deficiencies in graduates' spoken English. For example, Sharifah Zakiah Wan Hassan (2009) and Wan Mustapha et al. (2010) reported hesitation and passivity in oral interactions among university students. Lan, Khaun, and Singh (2011) revealed that poor speaking ability affected graduates' capacity to complete professional tasks such as presentations and report writing. Hymes (1972) argued that linguistic competence alone is insufficient; effective communication requires contextual fluency and confidence.

These challenges translate into real-world consequences. A study by Latisha and Surina (2010), based on findings by Wan Irham et al. (2007), showed that 90% of Malaysian employers prioritize verbal proficiency and confidence in English communication during recruitment. However, many graduates fail to meet this benchmark, citing anxiety, limited vocabulary, and grammatical errors as major obstacles (Zainuddin et al., 2019).

The MUET 2023 results further reflect systemic weaknesses. Although 65,886 candidates participated in the speaking component, the majority were placed in Band 3–3.5. The Malaysian Examination Council (2023) reported that most candidates relied on memorized responses, lacked elaboration, demonstrated limited vocabulary, and struggled with pronunciation and coherence. This suggests that years of English education have not effectively translated into real-world speaking ability.

Salleh (2022) critiques the current national assessment structure, noting that it places undue emphasis on written skills while neglecting speaking proficiency. This assessment imbalance creates a false sense of competence and leaves students unprepared for real-life oral communication. Similarly, Altabaa and Zulkifli (2024) argue that the marginalization of English Literature as a core component has eroded opportunities for students to engage with expressive, authentic language especially those from non-urban backgrounds.

These circumstances underline the need for alternative pedagogical approaches that are learner-centered, performance-based, and emotionally engaging. Spoken Word Poetry (SWP), a creative, expressive oral art form, emerges as a promising method to build fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and confidence in ESL learners. Through performance, learners are encouraged to use English meaningfully in a safe, collaborative environment addressing both the linguistic and psychological barriers to speaking proficiency.

These challenges translate into real-world consequences. A study conducted by Wan Irham, Shafinah and Azhari (2007), as cited in Latisha and Surina (2010), on employability awareness among Malaysian undergraduates, revealed specific communication-related competencies highly valued by employers (Table 1.1). Among these, the ability to articulate and express ideas verbally in English and deliver presentations in English were each rated at 90%, highlighting the significant emphasis placed on spoken English skills in the job market.

**Table 1.1***Employability Awareness among Malaysian Undergraduates*

Criteria of Candidates Preferred by Employer	Percentage (%)
Able to generate and express ideas verbally in English	90%
Able to do presentation in English	90%
Able to write report in English	60%
Able to speak English fluently	60%
Good command of English language (grammar)	30%
Good persuasive skills in English language	30%

Source: Latisha and Surina (2010), Wan Irham, Shafinah and Azhari (2007)

Latisha and Surina (2010) emphasized that poor English proficiency and inadequate communication skills are among the key factors contributing to graduates' low employability.

Many candidates were unable to respond to interview questions in English or construct simple, grammatically correct sentences. Zainuddin et al. (2019) further identified two significant mismatches between students' perceptions and employer expectations: first, the use of overly informal English in professional contexts, and second, the inability to speak English fluently, which resulted in low self-confidence and weak interpersonal communication during job interviews.

These findings underscore that speaking skills are not merely academic necessities but are critical to future professional success. Therefore, bridging this gap is crucial. ESL practitioners have attempted to address these shortcomings by implementing various

speaking-focused activities such as storytelling, public speaking, debate, and role-play. However, more dynamic and expressive approaches, such as Spoken Word Poetry, may offer fresh opportunities to nurture authentic oral communication skills among ESL learners.

### **1.2.1 Traditional Methods Used to Teach Speaking Skills**

Understanding the methodologies currently employed by educators to teach speaking skills in ESL classrooms is crucial before implementing Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) as an alternative approach. One of the most common methods is storytelling, which engages learners in speaking activities by encouraging them to develop conversations based on a provided topic (Marzuki, Prayogo, & Wahyudi, 2016). Storytelling operates on the premise that learners are captivated by their teachers' narratives, particularly those derived from folktales. Moreover, learners often enjoy recounting these folktales to their peers, inadvertently forming groups for sharing stories. Consequently, Marzuki et al. (2016) assert that incorporating folktales into interactive storytelling strategies effectively enhances learners' speaking proficiency and classroom engagement.

Similarly, Somdee and Suppaseteree (2012) emphasize that storytelling is an effective language acquisition method in the classroom, as it actively engages learners in speaking exercises. Furthermore, it serves as an exceptional verbal exercise, stimulating learners' imagination and plot creation while improving their speaking abilities (Reinders,

2011). This perspective is reinforced by Akhyak and Indranawan (2013), who highlight that storytelling significantly enhances learners' motivation to speak. In addition, the use of storytelling in speaking lessons supports the development of other language skills, including vocabulary acquisition, appropriate intonation, and accurate pronunciation (Kartiah, Rahman, & Jabu, 2014).

However, storytelling is not without its challenges. One key limitation is the difficulty in effectively conveying a compelling narrative, as a proficient storyteller must invest considerable effort into refining gestures and expressions to captivate the audience. If implemented in the ESL classroom, it is essential for educators to employ a variety of resources to make the narrative engaging. Otherwise, as Ramon (2016) notes, a monotonous delivery may cause learners to disengage from the storytelling process. Additionally, Woodhouse (2007) points out that storytelling may not align with every learner's preference, underscoring the need for careful consideration of the narrative's subject matter to ensure its relevance.

The second widely used method for enhancing speaking skills is role play. Byrne (1986) defines role play as a technique that allows learners to enact particular behaviors in a simulated context, providing opportunities for classroom interaction and motivation (Ladousse, 1995). As explained by Budden (2006), role play involves learners assuming the perspective of another individual within a fictional scenario, enabling them to practice language skills in realistic contexts. This method promotes interactive instruction in the classroom and prepares learners for real-life communication scenarios.

Qing (2011) tested role play at the intermediate college level and found that it improved students' intercultural awareness and general communicative competence. Nevertheless, role play has its drawbacks. According to Thornbury (2005), the public performance aspect of role play may intimidate self-conscious learners, as the perceived pressure to perform outweighs the challenge of speaking in English. Furthermore, the organizational demands of role play can be time-consuming, and learners often cluster based on age or friendships, leaving lower-proficiency learners feeling intimidated when paired with more assertive peers (Richard & Bohlke, 2011).

The third common technique for improving speaking skills is public speaking. Templeton and Fitzgerald (1999) define public speaking as the act of addressing an audience in an organized manner, typically with the goal of persuading, informing, or captivating listeners. Public speaking courses are integrated into extracurricular programs at many Malaysian universities, emphasizing verbal presentation skills, confidence building, and the ability to respond spontaneously to audience reactions (Cooper, 1985; Reece, 1999). Additionally, public speaking improves students' confidence in job interview scenarios and helps develop essential communication skills. Incorporating humor into public speaking, as suggested by Sultanoff (1994) and Wooten (1996), alleviates anxiety and fosters a more positive mindset, further enhancing the effectiveness of the speech (Davidson, 2003). However, this method poses significant challenges for learners who experience social anxiety. Such learners often fear humiliation and criticism, leading them to avoid public speaking altogether (Hindo, 2010).

Another frequently used technique to develop speaking skills is debate, which involves the structured presentation and defense of opposing viewpoints. Jagger (2013) argues that debate is particularly suitable for intermediate and advanced learners, offering a creative platform for expressing opinions. Similarly, Rubiati (2010) asserts that debate enhances analytical and interaction skills, providing learners with numerous opportunities to develop their speaking abilities. However, debate also has limitations. It requires extensive preparation time, and learners with low proficiency may struggle with spontaneous rebuttals or become emotionally affected while defending their arguments. Consequently, this method is less suitable for beginners or learners with limited speaking competence.

In summary, several traditional methods such as storytelling, role play, public speaking, and debate are utilized to teach speaking skills in ESL classrooms. While these methods have proven effective in various contexts, they are not without their drawbacks, including issues related to engagement, learner anxiety, and time constraints. Therefore, this study proposes Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) as an alternative method for enhancing speaking skills. The following discussion will explore how SWP can be integrated into teaching and learning speaking skills, addressing the limitations of traditional methods while fostering creativity, engagement, and fluency in ESL learners.

### 1.3 Introduction of Spoken Word Poetry

Spoken Word Poetry (SWP), also referred to as "Slam Poetry," encompasses all modern forms of poetry that are performed aloud, incorporating elements such as rhyming, wordplay, and various music genres like rap, blues, hip-hop, jazz, rock, and folk. It also draws on ancient oral traditions, emphasizing alliteration, articulation, and intonation (Gupta, 2022; Somer-Willett, 2010). Unlike traditional poetry, which prioritizes the written form and its visual presentation, SWP focuses on delivering an engaging, spoken performance that brings written words to life.

Performance poetry, as a tradition, dates back to pre-historic Africa and re-emerged prominently in the United States during the 20th century. The first Spoken Word Poetry performance took place in Chicago in 1984, led by American poet Marc Smith, with the inaugural National Poetry Slam competition held in San Francisco in 1990 (Gupta, 2022). While SWP borrows foundational elements from traditional poetry, such as subject matter, wordplay, and sound devices, it distinguishes itself through its performative nature.

Key elements of SWP include:

- (a) Subject: Refers to the main idea or theme the poet aims to communicate to the audience (Green, 2020).
- (b) Get Line: Describes the opening lines that establish the theme or capture the audience's attention, setting the stage for the narrative (Gupta, 2022).

- (c) Motive: Involves recurring images, actions, or sensory cues designed to alert the audience to the poem's key ideas (Baldwin, 2020).
- (d) Wordplay: Engages the audience by using words in creative ways to evoke humor, emotion, or sound effects, enriching the performance's dynamism (Gupta, 2022).
- (e) Sound Devices: Utilized to create euphony harmonious and easy-to-pronounce speech sounds that enhance the poem's impact when performed (Gupta, 2022).

The SWP method in this study emphasizes two critical aspects of language learning: vocabulary and pronunciation. In the context of SWP, "spoken" refers to the process of pronouncing words correctly, which is fundamental to effective communication. Fraser (2000) argues that fluency in spoken English involves mastering several sub-skills, including grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics, and articulation. Among these, articulation is particularly crucial; even with grammatical accuracy, poor pronunciation can render communication incomprehensible. Similarly, Seidlhofer (2001) highlights that pronunciation often reflects an individual's identity and regional affiliations, such as those seen in Malaysian accents like Kelantanese, Perakian, or Penangite.

It is noted that pronunciation challenges faced by ESL learners often arise from linguistic differences between their mother tongue and the target language. For instance, Gilakjani (2011) notes that learners frequently adapt English pronunciation to align with the phonetic rules of their first language. In Malaysia, where Bahasa Melayu is the official language, learners often face difficulty with English phonemes that do not exist in Malay. For example, the letter "a" in Malay has a consistent pronunciation (/ʌ/), whereas in

English, it can have multiple pronunciations (/ʌ/, /a:/, /e/, /ə/, /eɪ/, or /æ/). This disparity leads to uncertainty and frequent mispronunciation among learners (Shak, Lee, & Stephen, 2016).

Pronunciation is particularly significant in professional contexts. Employers often assess pronunciation during interviews as an indicator of language proficiency. According to Sarudin, Mohd Noor, Zubairi, Tuanku Ahmad, and Nordin (2013), English pronunciation was one of the most frequently evaluated skills during job interviews, cited by 56.9% of employers. Furthermore, pronunciation also plays a role in tasks like essay writing (35.5%), in-person interviews (26.1%), and oral presentations (10.3%). Poor pronunciation can result in missed opportunities, particularly in technical fields where effective communication is critical. For instance, a survey by Aspiring Minds (2014) revealed that 51% of unemployed engineering graduates in India struggled with spoken English, with pronunciation being the most significant issue. Similarly, Arkoudis et al. (2009) found that pronunciation posed a major barrier to employment for international students in Australia.

The "word" in Spoken Word Poetry refers to vocabulary the foundation of constructing meaningful sentences. Dalimunthe and Haryadi (2022) found that learners with extensive vocabulary knowledge used a wider range of low-frequency words compared to those with limited vocabulary. However, in Malaysia, Mokhtar, Singh, Abdullah, and Mat (2010) observed that many tertiary students lack sufficient vocabulary despite over 12 years of English exposure. To address this gap, this study introduces basic

activities focusing on high-frequency words commonly used in daily conversations. Once learners become comfortable with these words, they progress to learning synonyms and low-frequency equivalents, enhancing their vocabulary breadth and depth. Hilton (2008) asserts that developing a robust vocabulary is essential for ESL learners to achieve fluency and confidence in speaking English.

The "poetry" in Spoken Word Poetry refers to a dynamic form of artistic expression that blends performance with various styles such as slam poetry, jazz poetry, comedy, storytelling, and music genres like rap and hip-hop (Van Huyssteen, 2023). Unlike traditional poetry, SWP often uses rhyme, repetition, and sound devices to captivate audiences, with no rigid rules governing its structure.

In this study, SWP performance served as the culminating activity in the intervention classes. Participants performed on stage, showcasing their vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation skills, and creative techniques developed over four cycles of instruction. As SWP is relatively unfamiliar in Malaysia, raising awareness among educators and learners is essential. While it remains underexplored in most regions, Klang Valley has hosted prestigious SWP competitions featuring local pioneers such as Sheena Baharudin and Jamal Roslan, and international poets like Sarah Kay.

Local SWP performers employ diverse styles in their performances. For instance, Jamal Roslan, in his piece "*The Revolution Will Not Be Politicalized*" (2014), utilized rap to address societal changes in Malaysia. However, such styles require advanced

vocabulary, pronunciation, and memorization skills, making them less suitable for beginners. In contrast, Sheena Baharudin incorporates storytelling and traditional elements in works like "*Skin*," blending folk songs and hip-hop in a firm yet approachable tone. Similarly, Sarah Kay adopts an easy-going storytelling style, while Ted Jones employs jazz poetry, which is ideal for novice performers refining their pronunciation.

As a conclusion, while participants in the intervention are not expected to perform at the level of experienced poets, Spoken Word Poetry serves as a practical platform for developing vocabulary, pronunciation, and creativity. As Prabhu (1990) notes, no single teaching method is inherently superior; instead, SWP offers a valuable tool for helping ESL learners improve their speaking skills through structured practice and performance.

#### 1.4 Speaking as a Productive Skill

Speaking, as the primary means of conveying information and engaging in communication, is inherently an interactive process involving both the speaker and the listener. This interaction aims to create meaning through generating, receiving, and processing speech sounds or information (Ngadiso, 2016). Harmer (2007) defines speaking as a productive skill in which learners independently generate language. Speaking, along with writing, is classified as a productive language skill, with speaking representing the oral modality. These skills are crucial as they provide learners with opportunities to engage in real-life activities within the classroom (Hinkel, 2010). Moreover, productive skills such as

speaking and writing often serve as benchmarks for assessing the extent of learners' comprehension and language competence. Unless one is studying English solely for academic purposes without the intention of engaging in communication, developing proficient speaking skills is indispensable. Effective speaking skills instill a sense of achievement in learners and significantly boost their confidence. However, speaking, like other language skills, is more complex than it may initially appear, involving much more than simple word pronunciation.

Speaking encompasses a broad spectrum of elements, including discourse, grammar, strategy, and sociolinguistics (Chastain, 1998). According to Chastain (1998, pp. 330–338), speaking transcends the mere production of accurate sounds, the selection of appropriate words, or the construction of grammatically correct sentences. It is often the language skill that learners are most eager to master, as it is more commonly used than writing. The primary function of spoken language is to facilitate interaction among individuals, enabling them to connect and communicate effectively. Unlike writing, spoken language is produced and interpreted instantaneously. Both the speaker and the listener operate within limited time constraints to formulate and articulate their messages while simultaneously processing and understanding the information exchanged.

Spoken language is typically used in short, spontaneous, and variable face-to-face interactions. These interactions are often supported by non-verbal communication, such as body language, facial expressions, and gestures, which play a critical role in complementing and enhancing the spoken message. Speaking is essential for completing

tasks, exchanging ideas, expressing emotions, gathering information, providing guidance, and negotiating terms. One powerful medium for facilitating such communication is poetry.

Gultekin (2000) examined the impact of integrating poetry into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking classes. The findings revealed that incorporating poetry in speaking classes provided meaningful contexts for learners to interact with one another in a second language. Through poetry, learners engaged in authentic communication that not only enhanced their language skills but also fostered creativity and deeper emotional expression. This highlights the potential of artistic and performative tools, such as poetry, to elevate the effectiveness of speaking activities in the classroom.

#### **1.4.1 Integrating Poetry in teaching Speaking Skills**

The poor performance in the “Peperiksaan Menengah Rendah” (PMR) and “Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia” (SPM) English papers in 1999 led to the implementation of an English literature component in Malaysia’s English curriculum in 2000. The objective of this initiative was to cultivate students’ interest and proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking, while also instilling values, humanity, beliefs, and creativity (Ministry of Education, 2003). Mok (2008) highlighted that the methodologies employed by educators significantly influence the learning process, shaping learners’ skill development. Lazar (1993) and Maley (2001) proposed several approaches to teaching English through literature, including the content-

based approach, language-based approach, personal development approach, and stylistic approach.

Although the PMR examination and the formal testing of the English literature component have been abolished, the teaching of literature remains part of the English curriculum. However, it is no longer tested or graded. Instead, literature is now used as supplementary material to enrich students' learning experiences.

Teachers often utilize literature to enhance the four language skills—speaking, writing, reading, and listening (Deepa & Ilankumaran, 2018). In particular, incorporating poetry into the language classroom allows students to engage with texts from both literary and linguistic perspectives. Collie and Slater (1990) support this notion, asserting that literature enriches students' language and cultural understanding, provides authentic material, and fosters personal engagement.

From a linguistic perspective, poetry offers numerous benefits. It aids in fostering grammatical knowledge (Kırkgöz, 2008), practicing language skills and forms (Tomlinson, 1986), expanding vocabulary (Lazar, 1996), improving pronunciation, and serving as a rich source of language input (Duff & Maley, 2007). These linguistic advantages make poetry a valuable resource for language learning.

Conversely, poetry also nurtures literary appreciation. It enhances learners' expressive capabilities (Iida, 2016), promotes interactions with peers (Chanmann-Taylor,

Bleyle, Hwang, & Zhang, 2016), deepens understanding of diverse cultures (Lazar, 1996), and encourages personal engagement by allowing students to express individual ideas within a broader human context (Hess, 2003). Thus, poetry serves as an effective tool for developing speaking skills in the ESL classroom.

Pushpa and Seyed (2014) conducted a study on the role of poetry in self-directed ELT classes. Their findings revealed that learners communicate more effectively when given opportunities to discuss familiar topics and relate to the universal themes present in poetry. Clear guidance for task preparation, along with small-group discussions, further promotes creativity and engagement in the classroom.

Additionally, context-based exercises in self-directed classes have been shown to help learners uncover hidden talents and enhance their proficiency levels. Moreover, in such settings, the psychological well-being of learners improves as they gain greater freedom to express themselves without the dominance of a teacher as the central authority. Observations from these classes indicate that learners developed an increased appreciation for poetry, expressing enthusiasm for activities such as poetry recitation, creative writing, and other literary tasks.

Despite the extensive use of poetry in ESL classrooms to improve writing, reading, and grammar skills, limited studies have explored the potential of Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) for enhancing speaking skills, particularly in Malaysia. This study aims to fill this gap by examining SWP as an alternative pedagogy to improve the speaking skills of ESL

learners. By focusing on performance and creative expression, SWP provides a novel approach to developing oral proficiency in a more engaging and meaningful way.

### 1.5 Problem statement and rationale

Although English is a compulsory subject throughout Malaysian primary and secondary schooling, students' proficiency in speaking remains a pressing concern. The Malaysian University English Test (MUET), developed by the Malaysian Examination Council (MEC), is used to assess students' readiness for tertiary-level English. It consists of four components: Listening (800/1), Speaking (800/2), Reading (800/3), and Writing (800/4), with speaking being the most challenging for the majority of candidates.

As shown in Table 1.2, 65,886 candidates participated in MUET Session 3, 2023. However, the results show that only 2.74% achieved Band 5 and above in Speaking, while the majority (59.61%) scored between Band 3.0 and 3.5, and over 7.57% remained below Band 3. This indicates that most students, despite receiving formal English education for over a decade, struggle to demonstrate basic oral competency.

**Table 1.2***The Performance of candidates, MUET Speaking Skills Session 3, 2023*

800/1 Listening				800/2 Speaking		800/3 Reading		800/4 Writing	
Band	CERF Level	%	Cumulative Percentage	%	Cumulative Percentage	%	Cumulative Percentage	%	Cumulative Percentage
5+	C1+	7.35	7.35	0.26	0.26	1.61	0.01	0.01	0.01
5.0	C1	26.78	34.13	2.48	2.74	15.61	0.14	0.14	0.14
4.5		30.39	64.52	7.51	10.25	40.85	1.32	1.18	1.32
4.0	B2	25.09	89.61	22.51	32.76	76.91	8.13	6.81	8.13
3.5		8.52	98.13	38.00	70.77	93.85	29.38	21.26	29.38
3.0	B1	1.71	99.83	21.61	92.38	98.84	74.95	45.56	74.95
2.5		0.16	99.99	5.74	98.11	99.95	96.22	21.27	96.22
2.0	A2	0.01	100.00	1.83	99.94	100.00	99.89	3.68	99.89
1.0		0.00	100.00	0.06	100.00	100.00	100.00	0.11	100.00

Source: “Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia”, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, MUET Session 3 2023

The MUET report further highlights specific weaknesses: students relied on memorized responses, lacked the ability to elaborate points, repeated limited vocabulary, and failed to maintain coherence or confidence. Despite 11–13 years of English instruction, they struggled to construct coherent sentences or respond spontaneously.

These deficiencies are not limited to academic contexts. Kumar and Salahudin (2023) reported that many Malaysian graduates are unable to participate effectively in discussions, express thoughts clearly, or show confidence in professional settings. Echoing this, Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan of the Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) confirmed that communication in English remains a key concern among employers, particularly in private and international sectors. Many graduates are unprepared to handle interviews or workplace interactions in English (Bardan, 2020).

At the university level, Harun et al. (2021) found that 83% of technical students at UTHM performed poorly in MUET speaking tasks, despite strong reading scores. This reflects a significant disparity between receptive skills (reading, listening) and productive skills (speaking, writing). Further, Siti Zaidah et al. (2019) found that both employers and undergraduates agree on the critical role of English, with dissatisfaction voiced over the use of colloquial or grammatically incorrect English in professional settings.

While numerous strategies such as debates, storytelling, and role play have been used to address speaking challenges, they often lack emotional depth and authenticity. In light of this, Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) offers a compelling alternative. SWP is a performance-based poetic expression that encourages emotional connection, rhythm, tone variation, and self-expression. It creates space for students to engage with the language creatively and personally, enhancing both fluency and confidence.

Yahaya and Madzlan (2024) demonstrated that SWP helps students develop public speaking comfort, overcome fear, and practice vocabulary and pronunciation in meaningful contexts. Similarly, Saad et al. (2023) reported that SWP increased active participation, reduced language anxiety, and fostered greater self-confidence, particularly among shy ESL learners.

Given the limitations of traditional methods, the empirical gaps in MUET performance, and employers' demands for fluent communicators, this study proposes adopting Spoken Word Poetry as a learner-centered pedagogical tool. It is anticipated that students in the experimental group will be able to:

- (a) Speak more confidently
- (b) Construct grammatically accurate sentences
- (c) Improve vocabulary
- (d) Reduce shyness and fear of speaking
- (e) Apply oral skills in academic and future workplace contexts

In summary, the persistent shortcomings in speaking proficiency, despite decades of English instruction, demand innovative intervention. SWP not only addresses the linguistic dimensions of speaking but also responds to the emotional and psychological barriers learners face, offering a path toward more expressive, confident, and fluent English communication. Beyond addressing learner difficulties, this study also seeks to understand how instructional design influences teaching practices. By structuring the SWP intervention using the ADDIE model, the research aims to identify pedagogical

implications for ESL instruction. The study not only measures the effectiveness of SWP in developing speaking skills but also reflects on how teachers can adapt and implement performance-based methods within structured teaching models. This dimension is captured through Research Question 4.

## 1.6 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to implement and evaluate the use of Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) as an alternative instructional method to improve speaking proficiency among ESL learners in Malaysia. Despite 11 to 12 years of formal English education at the primary and secondary levels, many students still struggle with oral communication skills particularly in terms of vocabulary selection, pronunciation, confidence, and fluency. These issues highlight the need for innovative and contextually engaging teaching strategies in the ESL classroom.

Rooted in oral performance traditions, SWP emphasizes creative expression, voice modulation, rhythm, and emotional engagement making it a compelling medium for developing speaking fluency. SWP also integrates elements of rap, hip-hop, jazz, and storytelling (Gupta, 2020), which appeal to younger learners and align with their contemporary interests. However, SWP remains significantly underutilized as a structured pedagogical tool in Malaysian ESL classrooms.

In this study, SWP is operationalized through a 14 weeks intervention programme structured around the ADDIE Model comprising Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation phases. This model guides the creation and delivery of a SWP Speaking Template, offering a step-by-step framework to facilitate and sustain speaking development in a learner-centered environment. SWP also draws from multiple pedagogical approaches, including Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), the Engage-Study-Activate (ESA) model, and scaffolding techniques. The integration of these frameworks is intended to foster a holistic and meaningful language learning experience.

Ultimately, this study seeks not only to assess the effectiveness of SWP in enhancing speaking skills but also to provide empirical evidence and a pedagogical model that can be adapted for broader use in Malaysian ESL contexts. In addition to evaluating learner outcomes, the study also explores pedagogical implications by examining how the ADDIE-guided SWP template informs instructional practices in ESL classrooms.

## 1.7 Objectives of the Study

The present research aims to accomplish the following outcomes:

- (a) To identify obstacles faced by ESL learners in their ability to communicate effectively in spoken English.

(b) To evaluate the impact of Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) on enhancing learners' speaking abilities within an ESL classroom setting.

- To assess the significant differences between the "pre-test" and "post-test" scores of the control group.
- To assess the significant differences between the "pre-test" and "post-test" scores of the experimental group.
- To compare the post-test results between the control group and the experimental group to determine the effectiveness of the SWP intervention.

(c) To explore ESL learners' perceptions of SWP as an alternative method for improving speaking skills.

(d) To develop a SWP Speaking Template guided by the ADDIE instructional design model, aimed at providing a practical framework for ESL speaking instruction.

## 1.8 Research Questions

The present research seeks to address the following questions:

- What challenges do ESL learners face in developing their speaking skills?
- How effective is SWP in enhancing students' speaking abilities in the ESL classroom?
  - Is there a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results of the control group?

- ii. Is there a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results of the experimental group?
- iii. Is there a significant difference in the post-test results between the control group and the experimental group?

(c) What are ESL learners' perceptions of SWP as an alternative approach for improving speaking skills?

(d) What are the pedagogical implications of a SWP Speaking Template developed through the ADDIE instructional design model for ESL speaking instruction?

## 1.9 Research Hypothesis

### Hypotheses to Be Tested:

(a) Pre-test and Post-test Scores of the Control Group

- i.  $H_0$  (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the control group.
- ii.  $H_1$  (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the control group.

(b) Pre-test and Post-test Scores of the Experimental Group

- i.  $H_0$  (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group.
- ii.  $H_1$  (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group.

**(c) Scores Between the Control and Experimental Groups**

- i.  $H_0$  (Null Hypothesis): There is no significant difference in the scores between the control group and the experimental group.
- ii.  $H_1$  (Alternative Hypothesis): There is a significant difference in the scores between the control group and the experimental group.

### **1.10 Significance of the Study**

This study introduces Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) as an innovative, learner-centered approach for improving speaking proficiency in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms. Rooted in rhythm, live performance, and expressive communication, SWP provides an alternative instructional strategy that fosters linguistic competence alongside affective development, particularly in boosting confidence, motivation, and engagement among ESL learners.

The research is significant in several respects:

**(a) Pedagogical Advancement**

This study addresses a pressing pedagogical gap in Malaysian ESL classrooms by proposing SWP as a viable and creative instructional technique. While traditional methods often prioritize rote learning and grammatical drills, SWP offers contextualized speaking practice through poetry performance, storytelling, and peer

collaboration. This transition from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction fosters fluency, accuracy, and self-expression in a stress-free environment.

**(b) Theoretical and Practical Contribution**

The research applies the ADDIE instructional model (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation) to develop the SWP Speaking Template, serving as both a structured intervention plan and a replicable teaching framework. This offers a practical tool for educators, curriculum developers, and teacher trainers to incorporate SWP effectively into language programs.

**(c) Alignment with Youth Culture and Engagement**

By leveraging genres familiar to students such as rap, hip-hop, and jazz SWP resonates with learners' cultural experiences, increasing intrinsic motivation. This cultural relevance breaks psychological barriers such as speaking anxiety, shyness, and fear of error, thus lowering the affective filter and enhancing classroom participation.

**(d) Implications for Educational Policy and Institutions**

This study contributes to national education goals in Malaysia by aligning with calls to enhance communicative competence in English. Findings from this research may inform institutional practices and language policy, particularly in polytechnics, community colleges, and higher education institutions, where speaking remains one of the weakest language skills.

**(e) Employability and Graduate Readiness**

The ability to articulate thoughts fluently, confidently, and persuasively is essential in the workplace. Employers have highlighted graduate deficiencies in spoken

English, especially during interviews and presentations. Through SWP, students gain experience in public speaking, intonation, and vocabulary diversity, enhancing their professional communication skills and boosting employability.

(f) Research Gap and Local Adaptation

Although SWP has been implemented in several EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, its application in Malaysian ESL classrooms remains limited. This study fills that gap by adapting SWP to the local educational context, with clear scaffolding and evaluation strategies, thereby enriching the body of knowledge in second language acquisition and instructional innovation. From a pedagogical perspective, this study also provides valuable insights into instructional design and teaching strategies. The use of the ADDIE model offers a replicable structure for educators, demonstrating how creative methods like SWP can be integrated into formal ESL instruction. These findings contribute to teacher development and instructional planning, addressing Research Question 4 of this study.

### **1.11 Limitation of the Study**

This study acknowledges several limitations that may influence the scope, transferability, and interpretation of its findings. These limitations are identified to provide context for the current research and offer direction for future studies:

**(a) Sample Size and Institutional Scope**

The study involved 45 participants in the experimental group, all drawn from a single campus of a higher education institution in Ipoh, Malaysia. While the findings yielded insightful outcomes, the limited sample size and geographical scope constrain the generalizability of the results. Broader participation from the institution's remaining campuses and more diverse academic programs would improve representativeness and enrich the dataset.

**(b) Time Constraints and Pandemic Disruptions**

The research was conducted amid the COVID-19 pandemic, which posed significant logistical and pedagogical challenges. Restrictions on physical gatherings affected the scheduling of intervention activities and may have influenced participant engagement and performance. These factors limited the researcher's ability to monitor consistent progression during the implementation phase.

**(c) Learner-Centered and Pedagogical Constraints**

The Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) approach, though innovative, may not suit all ESL learners. Individual learning styles, introverted personality traits, or lack of interest in performative expression may hinder full engagement in the intervention. Learners with low exposure to poetry or creative activities may perceive SWP as challenging, thus affecting their participation and outcomes.

**(d) Instructional and Managerial Barriers**

Integrating SWP into an ESL syllabus requires significant time allocation, teacher preparation, and curricular flexibility. Not all educators may possess the pedagogical confidence, training, or resources to effectively implement SWP. In

standardized syllabi with fixed assessments and limited class hours, the sustainability and scalability of such interventions may be constrained.

## 1.12 Conceptual Definitions

Researchers and practitioners frequently employ different definitions. Therefore, this section presents the operational definitions of key terms used in this study to ensure clarity and consistency in interpretation throughout the thesis

### 1.12.1 Spoken Word Poetry

Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) is defined in this study as a performance-based literary expression that emphasizes rhythm, wordplay, and emotion to convey personal or social messages through oral delivery. It is employed as a pedagogical tool to enhance learners' speaking skills by integrating creative expression with oral fluency, Somers, Willett, 2009; Gupta (2020).

### 1.12.2 Speaking Skill

Speaking skill refers to learners' ability to produce spoken language fluently, accurately, and appropriately in communication. It involves pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and coherence in oral expression, Brown (2007), Bygate (1987).

### 1.12.3 English as a Second Language (ESL)

English as a Second Language (ESL) refers to the use or study of English by individuals whose native language is not English. In Malaysia, ESL denotes learners who acquire English through formal education where English is taught as a subject but not as the main medium of instruction, Richards & Schmidt (2010).

### 1.12.4 Fluency

Fluency is defined in this study as the ability to speak smoothly with minimal pauses, hesitation, or self-correction, and with appropriate rhythm and intonation during extended speech, Nation & Newton (2009).

### 1.12.5 Pronunciation

Pronunciation is the production of speech sounds in a clear, intelligible, and comprehensible manner, incorporating proper stress, rhythm, and intonation to enhance listener understanding Celce-Murcia et al., (2010)

### 1.12.6 Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the body of words a learner can use appropriately in context during speech production. This includes both high-frequency and low-frequency words, and the ability to retrieve and apply them effectively, Schmitt (2000)

### 1.12.7 Confidence

In this study, confidence denotes learners' psychological readiness and willingness to speak English in front of others, particularly in classroom, peer-group, or performance situations. It reflects their perceived self-efficacy in spoken language tasks.

### 1.12.8 Code-switching

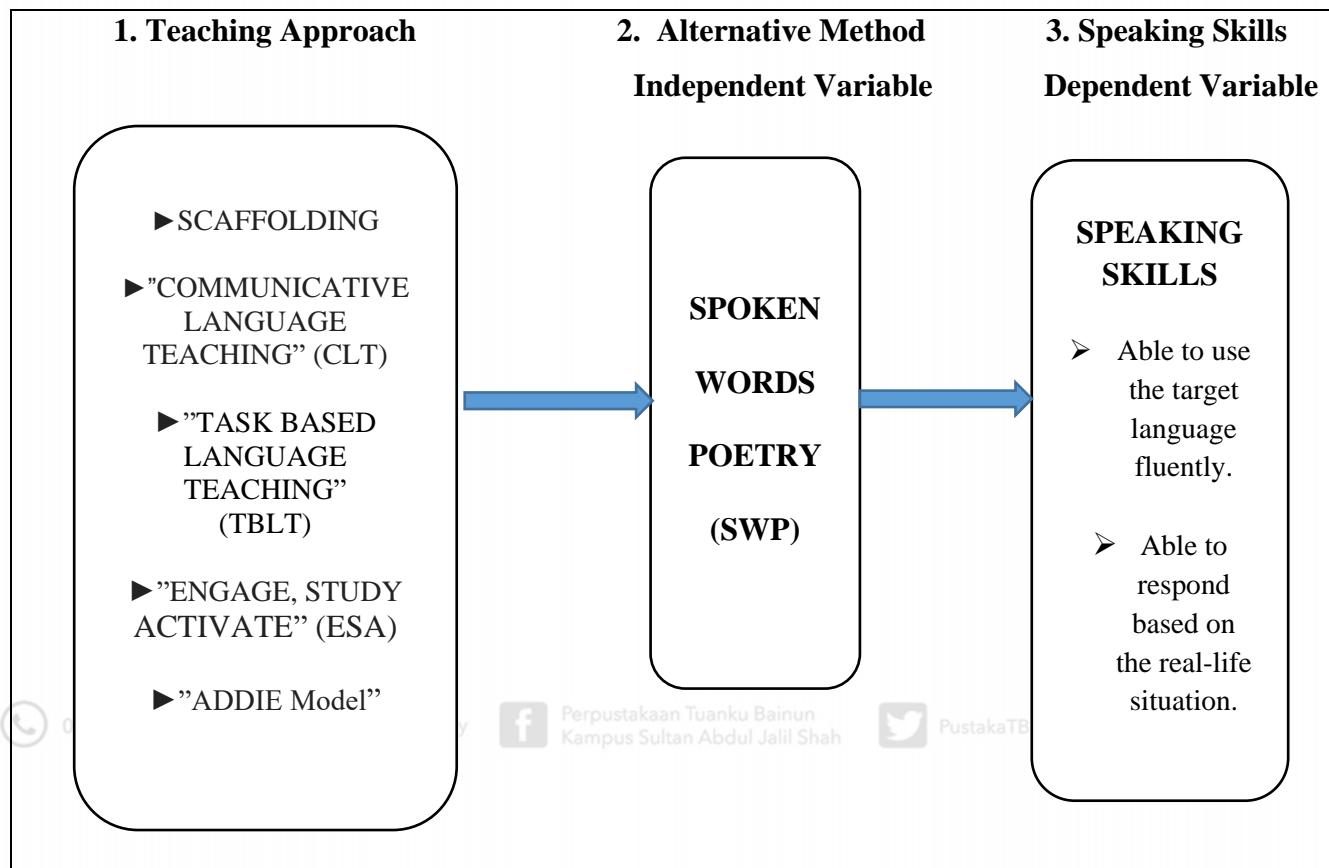
Code-switching is the alternating use of two or more languages in the same conversation or utterance. Within this study, it refers to learners' practice of switching between English and their first language (e.g., Malay) during speaking tasks as a coping mechanism, Sert (2005).

## 1.13 Conceptual Framework of the Study

Figure 1.1 presents the conceptual framework of this study, which examines three interconnected components: the teaching approach grounded in theories, the alternative method, and the targeted speaking skills. The framework illustrates the relationships among these concepts, integrating the independent variable (SWP Method) and the dependent variable (speaking skills) within a cohesive structure to achieve the research objectives.

**Figure 1.1**

*The Conceptual Framework of the Study adopted Wood, Brunner & Ross, (1979).*



The framework incorporates four foundational theories: Scaffolding, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and the Engage, Study, Activate (ESA) Speaking Model and ADDIE Model. These theories guide the instructional process and shape the implementation of Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) as an alternative teaching method for improving speaking skills among ESL learners.

### Textbox 1: Teaching Approach – Theoretical Foundations

The first component of the framework outlines the intricate theories underlying speaking instruction and their integration into the SWP Method. These theories collectively provide the instructional strategies and practices employed in the study:

- (a) Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): This approach prioritizes interaction as both the means and ultimate objective of language learning. Learners engage in meaningful communication using authentic texts and real-world contexts, promoting both linguistic and cultural fluency. The CLT framework also emphasizes the integration of learners' personal experiences into language instruction, making it more relatable and engaging (Nunan, 1991).
- (b) Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT): A subset of CLT, TBLT focuses on engaging learners in meaningful, real-world tasks that prioritize fluency and confidence over strict accuracy. This approach ensures that learning is driven by task completion rather than rote memorization of language rules.
- (c) Engage, Study, Activate (ESA) Speaking Model: Proposed by Harmer (1998), this instructional model captures learners' curiosity and motivation through engaging activities, promotes language exploration during the study phase, and encourages active application in real-life scenarios. The model aligns with Wills (1996), who emphasized the importance of exposure, use, and motivation for successful language learning.
- (d) Scaffolding: Drawing on Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, scaffolding emphasizes guided learning through interaction with teachers or more

experienced peers. In this study, scaffolding supports learners in progressively mastering speaking skills with structured guidance, fostering both independence and confidence.

(e) ADDIE Instructional Design Model: The ADDIE Model comprising Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation serves as a systematic instructional design framework for developing and delivering effective learning experiences. In this study, the ADDIE model structures the entire intervention process, guiding the design and refinement of the SWP Speaking Template. During the Analysis phase, learners' speaking challenges were identified. The Design and Development phases focused on constructing SWP activities aligned with the CLT, ESA, and Scaffolding principles. The Implementation phase involved conducting the SWP sessions over 14 weeks, and the Evaluation phase used both quantitative (pre/post-tests) and qualitative (interview data) analyses to assess outcomes. Integrating ADDIE ensures that the SWP method is not only pedagogically grounded but also instructionally sound, adaptable, and scalable for broader ESL contexts.

#### Textbox 2: Alternative Method – SWP as a Teaching Tool

The SWP Method serves as an alternative method to traditional speaking instruction, integrating the principles of the aforementioned theories. This method involves the following stages:

- (a) **Planning:** Learners select topics based on their personal interests and experiences, which are then transformed into SWP outlines.
- (b) **Drafting:** Students independently develop their SWP drafts, with teachers providing guidance as needed.
- (c) **Revising:** Teachers offer feedback to refine the content and delivery, ensuring linguistic and expressive clarity.
- (d) **Performance:** Students present their SWP pieces in either classroom or public settings, fostering social interaction and confidence in real-life communication.

The SWP method emphasizes the use of oral traditions, storytelling, and performance, creating a dynamic and engaging learning environment. It integrates elements of rhythm, creativity, and personal expression to develop pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence construction skills. Additionally, the performance phase provides opportunities for learners to overcome emotional barriers such as shyness and fear of judgment, aligning with Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction in learning.

#### Textbox 3: Speaking Skills – The Outcome

The final component of the framework focuses on the targeted outcome: competency in speaking skills. This outcome is assessed through SWP-specific rubrics that evaluate learners' ability to use the target language fluently, construct grammatically accurate sentences, and communicate confidently in real-life situations.

The two-way relationship between the SWP Method (Textbox 2) and speaking skill acquisition (Textbox 3) reflects the iterative nature of language learning. The SWP Method serves as both a means to develop speaking skills and an assessment framework to gauge learner progress.

By the end of the intervention, learners are expected to demonstrate improved speaking proficiency, including:

- (a) Enhanced fluency and pronunciation
- (b) Expanded vocabulary and sentence construction
- (c) Greater confidence in verbal communication

This framework underscores the SWP Method as a holistic teaching tool that blends theoretical foundations with practical application, offering a structured pathway for ESL learners to achieve speaking proficiency.

### **1.14 Summary of Chapter 1**

Chapter 1 introduces the foundation of the study by outlining the persistent challenges in developing speaking skills among ESL learners in Malaysia, despite over a decade of English instruction. It highlights the need for alternative, engaging methods and positions Spoken Word Poetry (SWP) as a creative pedagogical approach to address these issues. The chapter explains the problem statement, research objectives, and questions, focusing

on learners' linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical barriers. It further justifies the use of a mixed-method explanatory sequential design and the integration of the ADDIE Model in developing the SWP Speaking Template.

Key theoretical frameworks supporting this study include Scaffolding, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and the Engage–Study–Activate (ESA) model, each contributing to the structured implementation of SWP. The significance of the study is also outlined, with potential implications for ESL curriculum design, language pedagogy, and graduate employability. Limitations such as the pandemic's impact and restricted sample scope are acknowledged, and key concepts are defined for clarity. The chapter sets the stage for the next section, which will delve into existing literature and empirical findings related to ESL speaking instruction and the role of performance-based methodologies like SWP. It also sets the foundation for exploring pedagogical implications by examining how the ADDIE-based SWP template can inform instructional practices, as reflected in the fourth research question.