

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF
INNOVATION AND
INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION
(IJIREV)
www.ijirev.com



**VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: ASNAF STUDENTS'
PERSPECTIVES ON INTERACTING WITH TEACHERS IN A
HIERARCHICAL SCHOOL CULTURE**

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Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 30.10.2025

Revised date: 12.11.2025

Accepted date: 30.11.2025

Published date: 09.12.2025

To cite this document:

Haris, M. I. I., Abu Bakar, H. S., Yusuf, B. N., Hussin, K., & Bahrudin, A. A. (2025). Voices From the Margins: Asnaf Students' Perspectives on Interacting with Teachers in A Hierarchical School Culture. *International Journal of Innovation and Industrial Revolution*, 7 (23), 153-168.

DOI: 10.35631/IJIREV.723011

Abstract:

This study examines the perceptions of Asnaf students in Malaysia regarding their communication with teachers in a high power distant school culture, with a specific focus on the influence of online platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook on these interactions. The research is framed through a phenomenological lens, concentrating solely on the lived experiences of Asnaf teenagers aged 13 to 17, excluding teacher perspectives. Data were gathered via comprehensive individual and focus group interviews and analyzed thematically through a coding scheme derived from Hofstede's cultural dimensions and educational communication theories. The findings show that digital communication channels make it easier for students to get in touch, protect their privacy, and create a more relaxed environment that helps them feel less hesitant, afraid of being judged, and that there are hurdles to getting help. People thought that social media sites made it easier for students to get emotional support and faster feedback, which made them trust the sites more and want to use them more. Even while cultural norms that stress respect for authority are still strong, participants saw online communication as a useful way to deal with and, to some extent, lessen the effects of large power distance in teacher-student relationships. This study enhances the sparse research on communication equity in education by foregrounding the perspectives of

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students from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds. The results indicate that incorporating digital platforms into instructional practices may facilitate more inclusive and responsive communication, especially for marginalized groups in hierarchical educational settings.

Keywords:

Asnaf Students; Student Voice; Power Distance; Digital Communication; Teacher-Student Interaction; Inclusive Education; Malaysia

Introduction

Teacher–student communication remains a key determinant of educational equity and classroom participation. In cultural contexts characterised by high power distance a concept theorised by Hofstede (2001) hierarchical relationships shape interactions in ways that often privilege teacher authority. Teachers are perceived as dominant figures, while students may hesitate to ask questions, challenge ideas, or participate actively. This dynamic can restrict inclusive learning opportunities, particularly for marginalised groups such as asnaf students in Malaysia.

Recent evidence shows that power distance continues to influence learning outcomes in the 21st century. Laiche (2023) found that hierarchical norms in multicultural classrooms heightened student anxiety and limited open dialogue. Similarly, Wang (2023) highlighted how power distance can undermine classroom equity, restricting learner participation. At the leadership level, Al-Mahdy, Hallinger, Omara, and Emam (2022) demonstrated that entrenched hierarchical structures constrained teacher agency in Oman, indicating that the effects of power distance operate across multiple educational systems. Collectively, these findings affirm Hofstede’s view that power distance is a tangible barrier to participatory education.

Digital communication technologies have emerged as potential mediators of these hierarchical dynamics. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook provide informal, private, and accessible channels that may reduce the barriers inherent in traditional classrooms. Mwalwanda and Mhlana (2022) found that social media enhanced engagement in open and distance learning by fostering inclusivity and immediacy. More recent studies suggest that digital platforms can help reconfigure traditional hierarchies to enable dialogue and co-construction of knowledge (Bergdahl & Hietajärvi, 2022; Obasi & Madumere, 2024).

Despite these insights, research on how online communication specifically addresses power distance for asnaf students in Malaysia remains limited. Given their socioeconomic disadvantages such as limited access to devices, shared living spaces, or financial constraints these students may be disproportionately affected by hierarchical barriers. This study examines how digital platforms can transform these dynamics, contributing to inclusive education and more participatory teacher–student interactions.

Problem Statement

In high power distance educational contexts, classroom communication often reflects hierarchical norms: teachers assert authority, and students may remain passive or self-censor. Previous studies (Laiche, 2023; Wang, 2023; Al-Mahdy et al., 2022) demonstrate that these dynamics limit questioning, reduce participation, and reinforce teacher dominance. For asnaf

students, who face intersecting socioeconomic and structural disadvantages, these barriers are amplified, leading to restricted trust, minimal feedback, and unequal participation.

While power distance is well theorised (Hofstede, 2001), there is limited research on students' lived experiences. Spencer-Oatey (1997) noted that teacher–student relationships in high power distance societies often reflect broader cultural hierarchies, making authentic two-way communication difficult. Oyzon, Muega, and Acido (2018) found that students with egalitarian teachers developed stronger social and critical thinking skills, underscoring the formative role of hierarchical dynamics in shaping communicative agency.

Traditional classroom interactions are influenced by verbal and non-verbal cues of authority, teacher intimidation, and cultural deference. Peer mediation can offer support but rarely overcomes systemic hierarchical barriers. Digital platforms, however, provide private, low-pressure spaces where students can communicate with teachers without fear of judgment. Research suggests that social media and messaging platforms can flatten traditional hierarchies and facilitate collaborative learning (Samala et al., 2024; Bergdahl & Hietajärvi, 2022), but little is known about their role in supporting asnaf students specifically.

This study therefore addresses a critical gap by centring the voices of asnaf students. It explores:

1. How these students experience communication with teachers in a high power distance culture.
2. The communication channels they use.
3. Characteristics that shape trust and inclusivity.
4. How digital platforms may reduce hierarchical barriers and support equitable, student-centred communication.

Research Questions

1. How do asnaf students perceive the influence of hierarchical school culture on their communication with teachers?
2. What emotional and cultural factors contribute to hesitation, silence, or self-censorship among asnaf students in teacher–student communication?
3. Which communication channels do asnaf students prefer when interacting with teachers, and why?
4. How do digital platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram, Google Classroom) mediate or reduce hierarchical barriers in teacher–student communication for asnaf students?
5. What features of digital communication foster inclusivity, emotional safety, and participation among asnaf students?

Research Objectives

1. To explore asnaf students' perspectives on how hierarchical school culture affects their communication with teachers.
2. To identify emotional and cultural factors shaping their willingness to engage in teacher–student communication.
3. To investigate the types of communication channels used by asnaf students and their reasons for preference.
4. To examine how digital platforms reduce hierarchical barriers and facilitate equitable teacher–student interactions.

5. To evaluate key features of communication channels that promote inclusivity, emotional comfort, and participatory engagement among asnaf students.

Literature Review

Power Distance and Hierarchical School Culture

Conceptualising Power Distance in Education

Power distance refers to the extent to which less powerful members of institutions accept unequal power distribution as normal (Hofstede, 2001). In high power distance societies such as Malaysia, educational institutions reinforce hierarchical structures, where teachers are regarded as unquestionable authorities (Spencer-Oatey, 1997). This cultural norm influences classroom interactions, as well as leadership and decision-making across institutional levels. Compared to face-to-face interactions that carry clear hierarchical cues, digital channels may offer more egalitarian spaces for communication.

Teacher Authority and Student Silence

In hierarchical classrooms, teachers dominate discourse while students particularly asnaf students may refrain from asking questions or expressing disagreement. Laiche (2023) found that students in multicultural, high power distance classrooms exhibited elevated anxiety and limited participation. Similarly, Wang (2022) reported that such environments foster silence over inquiry. For asnaf students, socioeconomic constraints such as limited device access or shared living spaces intensify these cultural pressures, further inhibiting open engagement with teachers.

Systemic Effects on Communication and Trust

Power distance shapes not only student behaviour but also teacher practices. Al-Mahdy et al. (2024) observed that rigid hierarchies constrained teachers' instructional agency and limited trust-building, producing environments less conducive to participatory learning. This pattern illustrates how classroom communication can function as a mechanism of exclusion, rather than inclusion.^{[1][2]}(Supports RO1: Student hesitation; RO2: Teacher authority)

Asnaf Students and Communication Inequity

Marginalisation in Communication Dynamics

Asnaf students, who receive zakat due to poverty, often experience lower confidence, heightened anxiety, and a sense of diminished entitlement to participate in classroom discourse. While research on asnaf students traditionally emphasises financial aid and access, fewer studies examine their interpersonal and communicative experiences (Rozali et al., 2025). As Cortina et al. (2017) argue, students from collectivist, high power distance backgrounds are less likely to challenge authority, a tendency compounded by class-based disadvantage.

Intersectionality of Power and Poverty

The convergence of hierarchical norms and socioeconomic hardship creates multi-layered marginalisation. Asnaf students face both visible barriers (economic) and invisible barriers (cultural), which collectively limit participation and affect academic outcomes. This intersectionality highlights the importance of examining communication inequities within both cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

(Supports RO1: Student experience; RO2: Influence of power structures)

Communication Channels in Teacher–Student Interaction

Face-to-Face and Written Communication

Face-to-face interactions are shaped by non-verbal cues, formal tone, and teacher-centred discourse. In high power distance classrooms, these cues may provoke fear or passivity rather than engagement (Oyzon et al., 2018). Written communication, while allowing asynchronous expression, can be hindered by language barriers, formality, and lack of immediacy (Froment et al., 2017).

Peer Mediation and Support Structures

Peer mediation offers informal channels, with students using classmates as intermediaries in engaging teachers. However, success is context-dependent; in high power distance environments, peers may inadvertently reinforce hierarchical dynamics (Ling & Yee, 2021).^[1]_{SEP}(Supports RO3: Identification of communication channels; RO5: Effectiveness and inclusivity of each channel)

Digital Platforms as Mediators of Power Distance

Affordances of Digital Tools

Digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Google Classroom provide affordances including privacy, immediacy, and reduced formality, which can help bridge hierarchical gaps (Mwalwanda & Mhlana, 2022; Obasi & Madumere, 2024). Estrada Molina (2022) found that WhatsApp and Telegram support student engagement by offering safe, familiar, and informal spaces, particularly for those hesitant to speak up in face-to-face contexts.

Reducing Psychological Distance and Enhancing Dialogue

Digital communication shifts classroom culture from authority-driven to dialogue-driven. Bergdahl and Hietajärvi (2022) argue that online platforms promote responsiveness and emotional safety, critical for students with low confidence. For marginalised groups such as **asnaf students**, these platforms provide more equitable modes of engagement. Samala et al. (2024) emphasise that social media is not merely logistical but can disrupt traditional hierarchies and foster inclusive pedagogies.^[1]_{SEP}(Supports RO4: Role of digital platforms; RO5: Characteristics that build trust and inclusion)

Gaps in the Literature and Justification for the Study

While international literature recognises the role of power distance and the potential of digital platforms to mediate teacher–student communication, empirical studies focusing specifically on asnaf students in Malaysia are scarce. Most research addresses general cultural norms or digital learning tools but does not examine how communication patterns intersect with socioeconomic disadvantage. By centring the experiences of asnaf students, this study fills a critical gap and explores how digital tools can support their inclusion, voice, and participatory engagement in education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of **asnaf students** in communicating with teachers across various channels. Phenomenology was selected because it allows an in-depth understanding of how students perceive, experience, and make sense of power distance in educational communication (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach facilitated nuanced exploration of students' feelings of hesitation, trust, and engagement in hierarchical educational settings.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase framework: familiarisation with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Compared to quantitative methods, this design enabled capturing the richness of individual experiences and subtle socio-cultural influences on communication.

Participants and Sampling

A total of 10 asnaf students, aged 13 to 17, were purposively selected from two secondary schools in Malaysia. Participants were identified with assistance from school administrators and welfare officers, based on their zakat-recipient status and willingness to participate. Maximum variation sampling ensured diversity in age, gender, and school background, capturing a wide range of communication experiences.

This sampling strategy was particularly important given the intersection of cultural hierarchy and socioeconomic constraints affecting asnaf students, allowing the study to account for multiple layers of influence on communication behaviour.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, allowing participants to express their views in their own words while maintaining consistency across key themes. Interview protocols focused on:

- Students' comfort and hesitation in communicating with teachers.
- Types of communication channels used (face-to-face, digital, written, peer mediation).
- Perceived authority, feedback style, and teacher approachability.
- Experiences using platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or Google Classroom.

Interviews were conducted in Malay, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim before translation and analysis. This method allowed for capturing both verbal and socio-emotional nuances, which are essential in understanding communication dynamics in high power distance contexts.

Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach:

1. **Familiarisation** – Reading transcripts repeatedly to identify patterns.
2. **Initial Coding** – Creating free nodes in NVivo based on meaningful segments.
3. **Theme Development** – Grouping codes into tree nodes reflecting larger themes.
4. **Theme Refinement** – Reviewing themes for coherence and distinctiveness.

5. **Theme Definition** – Naming and defining final themes aligned with research objectives.
6. **Report Production** – Integrating themes into findings chapters.

Thematic analysis focused on:

- a. Two-way communication patterns,
- b. Use of digital platforms, and
- c. Characteristics of communication channels (e.g., accessibility, responsiveness, anonymity). NVivo 10 was used to systematically organise and retrieve coded data, enhancing analytic transparency and rigour.

Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability

Trustworthiness was ensured through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria:

Credibility

- Member checking: participants reviewed summaries to confirm interpretations.
- Prolonged engagement: multiple interactions (interviews + focus groups) deepened contextual understanding.

Transferability

- Thick descriptions of participant backgrounds and educational contexts enable readers to assess applicability to similar settings.

Dependability

- Research audit trail maintained, including coding logs, interview guides, and analytic memos.
- Inter-coder verification conducted during initial coding by a secondary researcher to ensure consistency.

Confirmability

- Reflexive journaling minimized researcher bias and documented evolving interpretations throughout analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation of transcripts, and data were stored in password-protected files. Participants were fully informed of their rights to withdraw, and consent was obtained prior to participation. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant institutional review board.

Findings

This section presents findings from thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups involving 10 **asnaf students** aged 13 to 17. Analysis focused on three main themes: (1) Two-Way Communication Between Asnaf Students and Teachers, (2) Communication Channels Used, and (3) Characteristics of Communication Channels. These themes align closely with the study's research questions and objectives.

Two-Way Communication Between Asnaf Students and Teachers

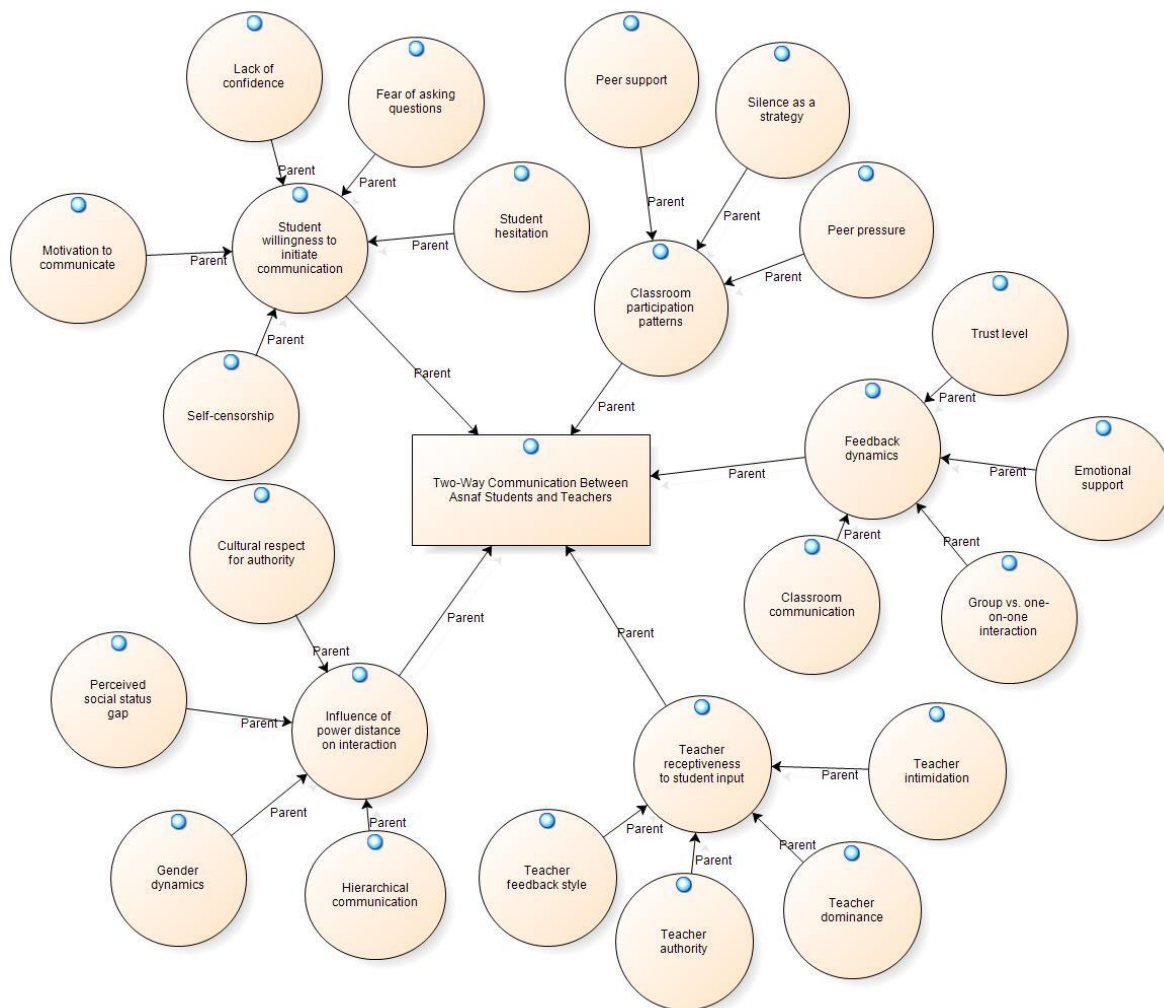


Figure 1: Two-Way Communication Between Asnaf Students and Teachers

Student Willingness to Initiate Communication

Several participants reported hesitation and fear of initiating conversations due to lack of confidence and fear of judgment or making mistakes. This reluctance often stemmed from self-censorship and perceived inadequacy. Motivation to communicate increased only when teachers were perceived as “friendly” or approachable.

“Sometimes I know the answer but still don’t raise my hand... I’m afraid the teacher will get angry if I’m wrong.”

(Participant A, Female, Age 14)

This pattern illustrates how internalised power distance leads students to view themselves as subordinate, intensifying reluctance to engage. Socioeconomic constraints, such as limited prior exposure to confident interaction, further exacerbate this hesitation.

Teacher Receptiveness to Student Input

Authoritative or discipline-focused teachers discouraged open dialogue. Feedback often consisted of corrections or reprimands, reinforcing teacher dominance and reducing opportunities for clarification.

"We don't dare to correct the teacher. Even if there's a mistake, we just stay silent."

(Participant G, Male, Age 16)

This indicates that teacher demeanour directly affects classroom equity and students' willingness to participate.

Feedback Dynamics

Students valued one-on-one interactions, whether in-person or via digital channels, due to the emotional safety provided. Individual encouragement from teachers boosted confidence and engagement.

"I feel more comfortable messaging the teacher privately... it's embarrassing to speak up in front of the class." (Participant E, Female, Age 15)

Influence of Power Distance on Interaction

Respect for authority, age, and social status prevented many students from questioning teachers. Cultural norms—especially for girls or students from rural or conservative backgrounds—reinforced silence. Socioeconomic status also influenced perceptions of teacher accessibility, with students from lower-income backgrounds feeling intimidated by “high-class” teachers.

"It's even harder to talk to male teachers... I'm a girl, so I have to show respect."

(Participant H, Female, Age 13)

Classroom Participation Patterns

Students often used silence strategically to avoid embarrassment, particularly in large classes. Peer support sometimes encouraged participation, especially through group chats or reminders.

Communication Channels Used

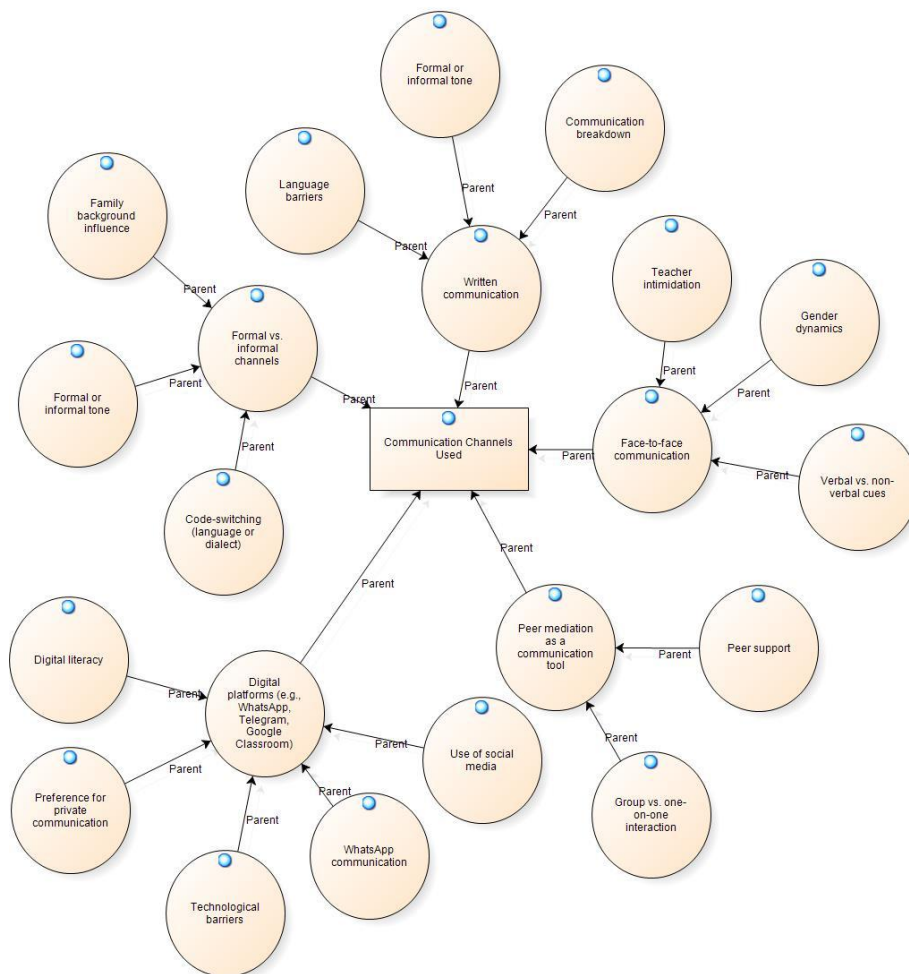


Figure 2: Communication Channels Used

Face-to-Face Communication

Barriers included teacher intimidation, stern facial expressions, non-verbal cues of disapproval, and gender-based discomfort in mixed-gender classrooms.

"The teacher's expression looked stern, and that made me lose the courage to ask."

(Participant C, Male, Age 15)

Digital Platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram)

WhatsApp was the preferred platform for its privacy, informality, and responsiveness. Students could ask questions calmly, even outside school hours.

"WhatsApp allows me to ask questions calmly in the evening."

(Participant L, Female, Age 17)

However, access to devices and internet stability varied, and digital literacy differed across age and rural–urban contexts.

Written Communication

Formal emails or portals were less preferred due to rigidity, language barriers, and slow responsiveness. Students described them as “too formal” or intimidating.

"If I have to write at length and formally, I am afraid I might make grammatical mistakes."
(Participant F, Male, Age 14)

Peer Mediation

Some students used peers to relay messages when direct communication felt intimidating, though peers sometimes reinforced hierarchical norms.

Formal vs. Informal Channels

Informal channels like WhatsApp allowed code-switching and casual interaction, which reduced anxiety. Formal channels heightened fear of errors and reduced engagement.

Characteristics of Communication Channels

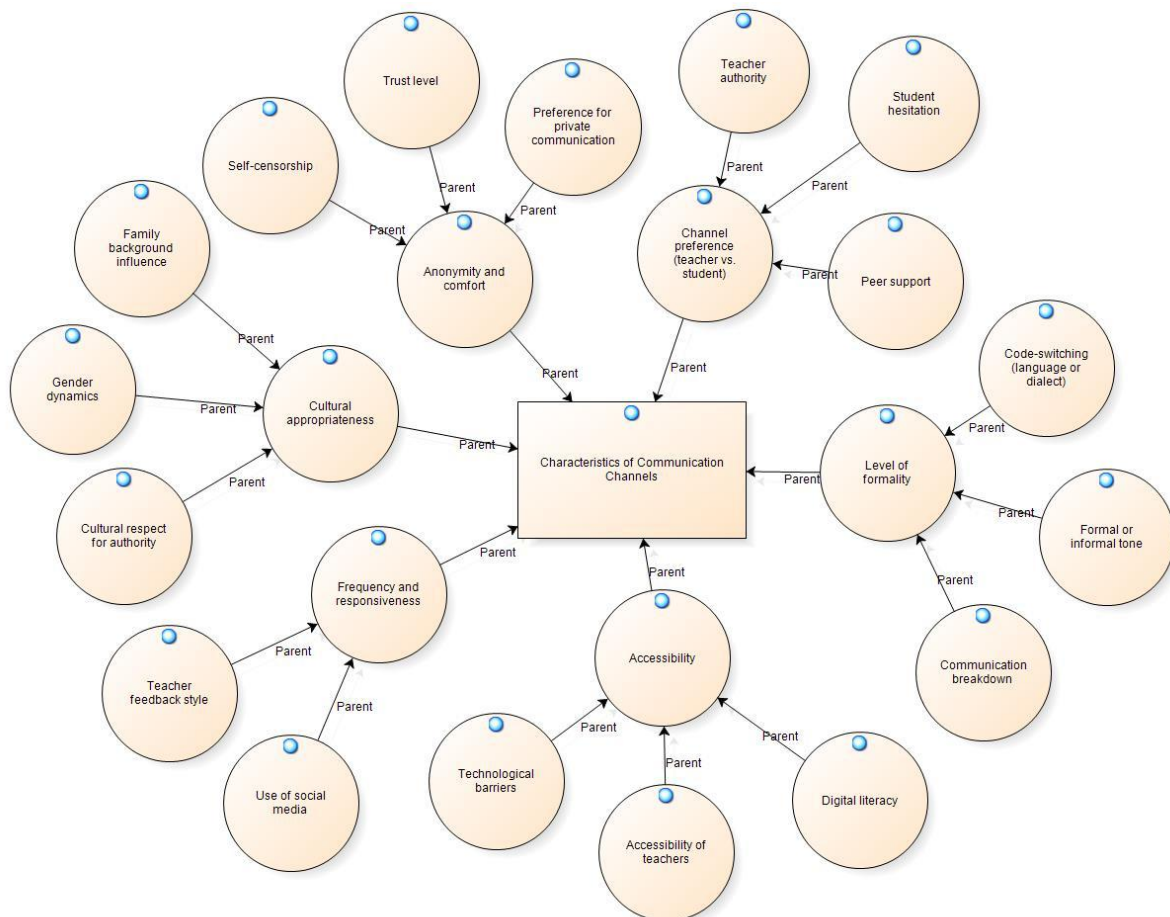


Figure 3: Characteristics of Communication Channels

Accessibility

Digital platforms provided 24/7 access, though teacher responsiveness varied. Limited device access sometimes required students to share devices at home.

Level of Formality

Lower formality in channels such as WhatsApp facilitated safer communication, allowing students to ask questions without fear of mistakes.

Digital Comfort & Accessibility

Merging the categories of anonymity, comfort, frequency, and responsiveness: students felt more confident in private messaging, especially when teachers responded promptly. Prompt responses were equated with approachability and support.

Channel Preferences and Cultural Appropriateness

Students preferred digital informal channels, but cultural norms affected interactions. Female students from conservative families hesitated to message male teachers even digitally.

"I must keep proper manners; I'm shy to message male teachers because my family might be upset."

(Participant D, Female, Age 16)

These findings demonstrate that hierarchical norms, cultural respect, and socioeconomic context strongly influence **asnaf students'** engagement in two-way communication. Digital platforms, particularly WhatsApp, serve as critical tools for reducing barriers, providing private, responsive, and culturally adaptive channels. Nonetheless, challenges such as digital literacy, gender norms, and teacher responsiveness remain significant. These insights address RO1–RO5 and contribute to understanding teacher–student interaction in high power distance educational contexts.

Discussion

This study examined how digital communication can reduce power distance in teacher–student interactions, specifically among **asnaf students** in Malaysia. The discussion interprets findings through Hofstede's power distance theory and prior literature, focusing on: (1) two-way communication patterns, (2) communication channels, and (3) the characteristics of those channels.

Power Distance and Student Willingness to Communicate (RO1 & RQ1)

Findings reaffirm the strong influence of power distance on student communication. **Asnaf students** expressed hesitation, fear of judgment, and low confidence, particularly in face-to-face settings. Avoidance of participation was linked to teacher authority, gender norms, and fear of disrespect — consistent with Hofstede (2001), Laiche (2023), and Wang (2022).

Self-censorship was evident, with students resorting to silence or indirect communication. This echoes Spencer-Oatey (1997), who noted that students internalise perceived lower status in high power distance societies. These insights align with RO1 and RQ1, showing how internalised cultural norms suppress students' willingness to initiate dialogue.

Teacher Receptiveness and Feedback Dynamics (RO2 & RQ2)

Teacher-related factors, including feedback style, dominance, and intimidation, were key communication barriers. Teachers perceived as unapproachable or overly formal discouraged questioning, particularly among less confident students.

Conversely, when teachers used gentle tones and offered emotional support, students participated more actively. Private, one-on-one interactions were especially effective. These findings align with Cortina et al. (2017) and Al-Mahdy et al. (2024), highlighting that teacher behaviour can reinforce or soften classroom hierarchies.

RO2 and RQ2 are addressed: teacher attitudes directly influence communication equity.

Communication Channels and Their Relative Effectiveness (RO3 & RQ3)

Four key channels were identified: face-to-face, digital, written, and peer mediation. Face-to-face communication was often avoided due to non-verbal intimidation and hierarchical cultural norms. Students preferred digital messages (e.g., WhatsApp) for their asynchronous, low-pressure nature, though formality and language barriers persisted.

Peer support helped some students navigate teacher expectations, though peer pressure could also intensify anxiety. These findings echo Oyzon et al. (2018) and Froment et al. (2017), indicating the need for context-sensitive channel choices. RO3 and RQ3 are supported: students select communication channels based on comfort, confidence, and situational factors.

Role of Digital Platforms in Reducing Hierarchical Barriers (RO4 & RQ4)

WhatsApp and Telegram emerged as preferred tools, providing privacy, anonymity, and quick responses. These platforms allowed students to communicate without public scrutiny or breaching cultural norms. Asynchronous messaging gave time to compose thoughts, reducing pressure and fostering participation.

Several students described these platforms as “safe spaces” to ask questions without fear of embarrassment.

These findings align with Obasi & Madumere (2024) and Mwalwanda & Mhlana (2022), confirming RO4 and RQ4. Despite occasional barriers like digital literacy and limited internet access, students reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with digital channels.

Characteristics of Inclusive Communication Channels (RO5 & RQ5)

Three key characteristics emerged:

1. **Accessibility:** Teachers who were reachable via phone or social media were perceived as approachable.
2. **Cultural Appropriateness:** Informality facilitated comfort, while code-switching (e.g., English and dialect) bridged formal divides without violating respect norms.
3. **Anonymity and Responsiveness:** These reduced fear and enabled honest communication.

These characteristics reinforce Samala et al. (2024) and Bergdahl & Hietajärvi (2022), confirming RO5 and RQ5. Well-designed channels can reduce power distance while respecting cultural expectations.

Implications of the Study

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to understanding power distance in education, particularly among socioeconomically marginalized asnaf students. By integrating Hofstede’s theory with digital communication frameworks, it shows how hierarchical norms can be mitigated through

informal, accessible digital tools. Trust-building and anonymity emerge as critical mediators, offering a new perspective on teacher–student interaction in high power distance contexts.

Practical Implications

For teachers and administrators:

- a. Use digital platforms like WhatsApp for responsive, low-pressure engagement.
- b. Adopt culturally appropriate informal communication, encouraging participation without undermining respect.
- c. Provide individual attention via private channels to build confidence in hesitant students.
- d. Accommodate linguistic diversity and digital literacy gaps through code-switching and guidance.

Recommendations

For Teachers

- a. Offer after-class feedback through WhatsApp or similar tools.
- b. Use culturally appropriate tone and code-switching to build trust.
- c. Provide private vs. public communication options for shy or anxious students.

For School Leaders and Policymakers

- a. Integrate communication skills and digital tools into professional development.
- b. Ensure device access, internet connectivity, and basic digital literacy for asnaf students.
- c. Consider peer mediation structures to support communication confidence.

For Future Researchers

- a. Conduct longitudinal studies on digital communication and academic outcomes.
- b. Examine differences in power distance perceptions across gender, ethnicity, and school type.
- c. Explore teacher training and institutional support for transforming hierarchical communication cultures.

Conclusion

This study explored how digital communication can reduce power distance and support inclusive teacher–student interactions among asnaf students. Key insights include:

- a. Two-way communication is shaped by internalised power norms but can be enabled through trust and private exchanges.
- b. Digital platforms mediate hierarchical barriers, increasing accessibility and reducing intimidation.
- c. Channel characteristics—responsiveness, formality, and anonymity—critically encourage participation.

In sum, while power distance remains embedded in Malaysian classrooms, it is not immutable. With the right tools and strategies, teachers can foster participatory and equitable communication, even in culturally hierarchical contexts.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to all individuals and institutions involved in this research. Special thanks go to the research team for their commitment, cooperation, and valuable contributions throughout the study. The authors are also grateful to the Faizuddin Centre of Educational Excellence and Majlis Agama Islam & Adat Istiadat Melayu Perlis (MAIPs) for the generous funding that supported this project, which aims to develop communication skills among the asnaf community especially students in the state of Perlis.

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