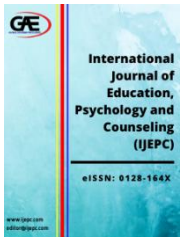
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EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF CHAT LANGUAGE FEATURES ON ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

This study investigated how chat language, including code-switching, abbreviations, slang, and informal expressions, influences the English writing skills of Malaysian secondary school students. A qualitative design was used with 60 Form Four and Form Five students from three urban secondary schools in Kota Bharu, Kuala Lumpur, and Kota Kinabalu, recruited from three urban secondary schools in Kota Bharu, Kuala Lumpur, and Kota Kinabalu via purposive sampling; these locations were chosen to reflect a range of linguistic and regional backgrounds. Data were drawn from a questionnaire covering students' chat language use and digital communication habits, along with their attitudes toward online interaction. Alongside 15 WhatsApp chat logs were analysed using Conversation Analysis (CA) to identify patterns such as code-switching, abbreviations, emojis, and informal lexical choices. Evidence of writing impact was drawn from students' self-reported questionnaire responses and a supplementary analysis of English examination scripts pre-screened by teachers for chat language features. Abbreviations and code-switching emerged as the most frequent features in WhatsApp communication, alongside heavy use of emojis and informal language. A partial transfer of chat language into formal writing was observed, mainly in vocabulary and sentence structure, and students with higher digital engagement were more likely to carry over informal elements such as code-switching and short forms, though most still maintained acceptable writing standards. In sum, the study points to both the benefits and the challenges mobile-mediated communication brings to English writing development

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Introduction:

The way young people talk to one another has shifted with the rise of digital communication technologies, and their everyday language use has shifted along with it. Mobile-mediated communication (MMC) platforms such as WhatsApp now sit at the centre of students' social lives. These platforms give near-instant access to text, images, voice notes, and other multimedia. In Malaysia specifically, WhatsApp dominates: 97.7% of respondents in a national survey named it their preferred communication platform (Statista Research Department, 2023). As smartphones and internet-based messaging have become part of daily adolescent life, a distinctive style of writing has developed alongside them. Researchers generally call this chat language.

Chat language is the informal register used in digital spaces. It's typically marked by abbreviations, acronyms, emojis, slang, shortened spellings, and code-switching (Tagg, 2015). Students use these features to communicate faster and express emotion, and they help build rapport online too. But as WhatsApp becomes a bigger part of daily student life, a natural question follows: does this informal register start bleeding into formal academic writing?

Code-switching is one of the most prominent features of Malaysian chat language. Malaysia is home to Malay, English, Mandarin, Tamil, and various local dialects, and moving between them mid-conversation comes naturally to most speakers. Students switch languages in WhatsApp chats for a range of reasons, to signal identity, build solidarity, or simply clarify meaning in the moment. Prior research supports this reading: code-switching serves real social and communicative purposes in multilingual communities, it reflects competence, not a gap in ability. If anything, it reflects how fluidly bilingual and multilingual speakers actually use language (David, 2012; Gill, 2014).

Nonetheless, the growing use of chat language and code-switching has not settled the debate over what it does to students' formal writing. Some research points to real risk. Frequent exposure to informal digital communication has been linked to non-standard features creeping into academic writing, spelling errors and grammatical slips in particular, alongside a general drop in formality (Ling & Baron, 2007; Thurlow, 2006; Nordin et al., 2017). Other researchers push back on this. Blake (2009) argues that digital communication can support language development, it gives students more authentic interaction, room for linguistic creativity, and broader exposure to multiple languages. With findings pulling in opposite directions, the relationship between chat language and writing skills is still an open question.

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A substantial body of research now exists on digital communication, but the Malaysian context remains comparatively under-examined. Most existing work centres on public social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Private messaging environments like WhatsApp, where language tends to be more spontaneous and less shaped by audience awareness, remain comparatively under-studied. Few studies have looked closely at how Malaysian secondary school students actually use chat language and code-switching in real WhatsApp conversations, or how those habits carry over to formal writing. Malaysia's distinctive multilingual makeup makes local evidence especially valuable here; to better understand how informal digital communication relates to academic literacy.

This study responds to those gaps by examining how Malaysian secondary school students use chat language in real WhatsApp conversations, with particular attention to code-switching and its relationship to formal writing skills. It sets out to achieve three objectives:

1. Identify the core linguistic features and characteristics of chat language used by Malaysian secondary school students in WhatsApp messages.
2. Analyze how and why these students employ code-switching during digital messaging.
3. Examine how chat language features surface in students' formal English writing.

In line with these objectives, the research addresses the following questions:

1. What are the nature and characteristics of Malaysian secondary school students' chat language?
2. How do Malaysian secondary school students use code-switching in chats?
3. How are Malaysian secondary school students' writing skills affected by chat language?

Answering these questions contributes to research on digital communication and multilingual practices in Malaysia, and to English language learning more broadly. These findings may be useful to educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers looking to help students draw a clearer line between informal digital communication and formal academic writing.

This study contributes to the literature on digital communication and language learning in several respects. First, it offers a detailed look at code-switching patterns in real WhatsApp interactions, examining lexical, phrasal, sentence-level, and end-particle switching separately.

It also brings together WhatsApp chat log analysis, questionnaire responses, and examination script analysis in a single mixed-methods design. This makes it possible to examine students' language use across both informal and formal contexts. Finally, the data span schools in Kota Bharu, Kuala Lumpur, and Kota Kinabalu, giving the study a view across different multilingual settings within Malaysia. These three contributions collectively clarify how digital communication habits relate to students' formal writing skills in a multilingual educational context.

Literature Review

Mobile Media and Communication (MMC)

Mobile-Mediated Communication (MMC) refers to communication via mobile devices that enables synchronous and asynchronous interaction using informal and flexible language

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(Zhenzhen, 2020). It supports language learning through social interaction and comprehensible input (Smith et al., 2018). Studies show MMC is commonly used for quick communication, while also reflecting informal language features such as abbreviations, emojis, and code-switching (An & Frick, 2006; Baron, 2020; Zainuddin et al., 2020). It also promotes participation, interaction, and creative language use in communication (Aslam & AbuSa'aleek, 2019; Jones & Brown, 2020).

WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a mobile messaging application that enables real-time synchronous communication through internet-based messaging across text, voice, and multimedia formats (Koum, 2019). It provides a cost-effective alternative to traditional SMS and supports both individual and group communication, allowing users to interact instantly regardless of location. Its features, including group chats and multimedia sharing, facilitate flexible and continuous interaction in digital communication (Agarwal et al., 2018; Koum, 2019).

Code-Switching in Chats

Code-switching in chats means alternating between two or more languages within a single conversation, a practice common among bilingual and multilingual speakers (David, 2006; Gill, 2014). In Malaysia, this is a widespread feature that reflects the country's multicultural, multilingual makeup (David, 2012). On WhatsApp specifically, code-switching tends to appear alongside other informal features like abbreviations, emojis, and localized expressions, together forming a distinct chat language variety (Ting, 2010; Rahman, 2023).

It can also involve code-mixing and linguistic interference, where lexical or orthographic elements from one language surface within another (Lee & Williams, 2017). It functions as a communicative strategy for bilingual interaction, shaping what Malaysian digital chat language looks like.

Emoticons

Emoticons are text-based symbols used to convey emotion and tone in written messages (Dresner et al., 2010). In Mobile-Mediated Communication (MMC), they substitute for non-verbal cues, reducing ambiguity in text-based exchanges. Common ones like ":)", ":(", and ";)" each signal a different emotional state or intent (Kelly et al., 2015).

Writing skills

For this study, writing skills refer to students' ability to produce formal academic texts with accuracy and clarity. This covers grammatical accuracy, coherence and cohesion, and appropriate vocabulary, along with adherence to formal writing conventions like structure, tone, and style. They are operationalised through students' performance in standardized writing tasks, assessed against a rubric built around these components.

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Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three theoretical perspectives to explain how and why students code-switch in digital chat interactions. Together, they also help explain how this code-switching might relate to writing development.

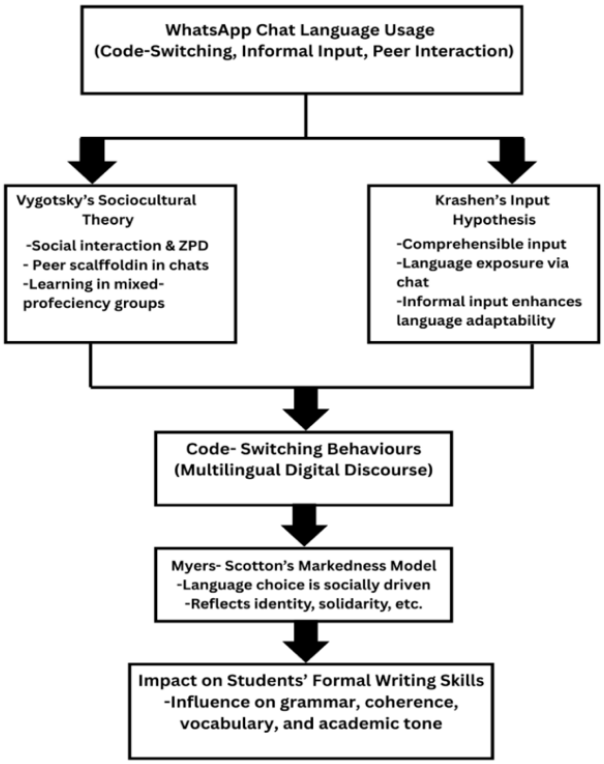


Figure 1 : Illustrates the integration of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Krashen's Input Hypothesis, and Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model.

- **Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory** (1978) holds that learning happens through social interaction, within what he called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In WhatsApp chats, this plays out in peer-to-peer conversations where more proficient speakers scaffold language learning for others, and code-switching serves as that bridge.
- **Krashen's Input Hypothesis** (1982) argues that language acquisition happens when learners get "comprehensible input" just slightly beyond their current level (i+1). WhatsApp chats put students right in the middle of authentic, informal digital discourse, where code-switching gives them contextualized exposure to new vocabulary and structures.
- **Myers-Scotton's Markedness Model** (1993) frames language choice as a matter of marked versus unmarked social norms. In WhatsApp chats, students switch codes to hit specific social goals like building solidarity, asserting identity, or being clearer. These three perspectives don't compete so much as stack: code-switching functions as a social-learning mechanism and a source of comprehensible input, while also serving as a deliberate communicative choice.

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Past Studies

International Studies on Chat Language and Writing

Crystal (2011), Baron (2013), and Ali and Chan (2018) all found that heavy use of chat language and instant messaging can hurt students' formal writing, grammar and punctuation in particular, along with sentence structure. Chat language may fuel creativity in informal settings, but it also seems to make it harder for students to hold onto accuracy and structure once they're writing academically. Their work points to the same core problem: digital communication habits can chip away at formal writing accuracy, particularly once informal habits start showing up in academic contexts. Plester et al. (2009) complicate this picture, finding that while textism use among UK children correlated with some literacy gains, leaning too heavily on abbreviated forms was also tied to weaker spelling accuracy in certain cases.

Malaysian Studies on Chat Language and Code-Switching

In the Malaysian context, Ahmad and Tan (2020), Lee and Ismail (2018), and Zulkifli and Ng (2017) found that frequent chat language use among teenagers negatively affects formal writing, grammar and coherence especially, along with overall structure. Their studies show that informal features such as abbreviations, shortcuts, emoticons, tend to carry over into academic writing, chipping away at students' command of standard English. Ibrahim and Kassim (2019) found much the same pattern that instant messaging features such as abbreviations and informal sentence structures show up in academic writing, weakening both accuracy and control over formal conventions. More recent work tells a slightly different story, though. Lim and Tan (2024) and Sari and Abdullah (2022) frame code-switching in Malaysian digital communication as a pragmatic, identity-marking strategy. Chong et al. (2025) similarly documented lexical, phrasal, and end-particle switching patterns among Malaysian youth across several platforms.

Research Gaps Identified

A review of past literature reveals four critical gaps that this study addresses:

1. **Methodological:** Most studies lean entirely on self-report questionnaires, without any authentic chat log analysis to back them up.
2. **Contextual:** WhatsApp, despite being the dominant platform in Malaysia, is barely studied on its own.
3. **Linguistic granularity:** Code-switching tends to get treated as one big category, rather than broken down by linguistic level (lexical, phrasal, sentential, end-particle).

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design combining Conversation Analysis (CA) of authentic WhatsApp chat logs, questionnaire data, and examination script analysis. The research questions ask how and why students use chat language and code-switching and answering that means looking closely at naturally occurring interaction; the questionnaire and

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examination script data were then used to contextualise and back up those qualitative patterns. The research ran in five phases:

Phase 1 (Planning Stage): Prepared the research instruments and ran a pilot study.
Phase 2 (Week 1): Selected schools and recruited participants at three urban schools. Purposive sampling gave us 60 students (30 Form Four, 30 Form Five) with English grades A or B.
Phase 3 (Week 2): Administered the "Your Lifestyle and Chatting" questionnaire, collected 15 WhatsApp chat logs meeting the inclusion criteria, and transcribed all chat interactions.
Phase 4 (Week 3): Collected chat log files and examination papers from Form 4 and Form 5 students at each school.
Phase 5 (Week 4): Analysed the data using Conversation Analysis (CA), numbering the chat log files and coding participants, then summarised the characteristics of chat language from the examination papers.

Population and Sampling

Sixty (60) Form Four and Form Five students with English grades of A or B were selected from three urban secondary schools in Kota Bharu, Kuala Lumpur, and Kota Kinabalu. Purposive sampling was used here to ensure participants had sufficient English proficiency for the writing component, and to capture a spread of regional and linguistic contexts across Malaysia. To protect participant confidentiality, the three schools are referred to throughout this article as School A, School B, and School C; their real names have been withheld and replaced with these pseudonyms.

Data Collection Methods

Chat Log Dataset

Fifteen (15) authentic WhatsApp chat logs were collected from Form Four and Form Five students across the three participating schools. Each log had to meet four criteria: (a) a minimum duration of 2–3 hours, (b) at least 30 response messages, (c) naturally occurring conversation with no researcher prompts, and (d) a mix of topics, covering school discussions, social issues, and personal interests. The logs captured conversations among groups of 5–8 participants, giving just enough interactional data to work with for Conversation Analysis. Table 1 below shows how the chat logs break down by school and also form level.

Table 1: Distribution of Chat Logs Across Participating Schools (Pseudonymised)

School	Location	Form Four Logs	Form Five Logs	Total Logs
School A	Kuala Lumpur	3	2	5
School B	Kota Bharu	3	3	6
School C	Kota Kinabalu	2	2	4
Total		8	7	15

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Questionnaire Dataset

Sixty (60) students completed the "Your Lifestyle and Chatting" questionnaire, made up of 17 open-ended questions split into three sections: (a) general chat habits (frequency, duration, platforms), (b) language use and code-switching practices, and (c) perceptions of how chat language affects writing skills. Table 2 provides demographic distribution of questionnaire respondents.

Table 2: Demographic Distribution of Questionnaire Respondents (N=60)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
School	School A	20	33.3
	School B	20	33.3
	School C	20	33.3
Form Level	Form Four	30	50.0
	Form Five	30	50.0
English Grade	A	38	63.3
	B	22	36.7

Examination Script Analysis

English examination scripts were pre-screened by subject teachers for the presence of chat language features and, where present, were made available for supplementary analysis to help address Research Question 3.

Data Analysis: Conversation Analysis

Conventional Conversation Analysis (CA) traditionally focuses on spoken interactions, relying on real-time vocal cues and immediate turn-taking (Sacks et al., 1974). However, this study adapts CA to a text-based digital environment (Digital CA) to analyze naturally occurring WhatsApp logs. Because digital chat is asynchronous, the structural mechanics of interaction are fundamentally shaped by platform affordances. This means that traditional concepts like turn-taking and adjacency pairs are realized through message posting sequences and time-stamped chat bubbles rather than continuous vocal floor-holding (Herring, 2021; Hutchby, 2021). To support this digital adaptation, the analysis treats creative typographical features like capitalization, elongated word spellings, and emojis as functional equivalents to spoken prosody, pitch, and non-verbal cues (Dresner & Herring, 2010; Meredith & Stokoe, 2022). Following the iterative qualitative process outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018), this adapted framework systematically examines how code-switching and informal chat elements function as structured, orderly interactional strategies within multilingual digital discourse.

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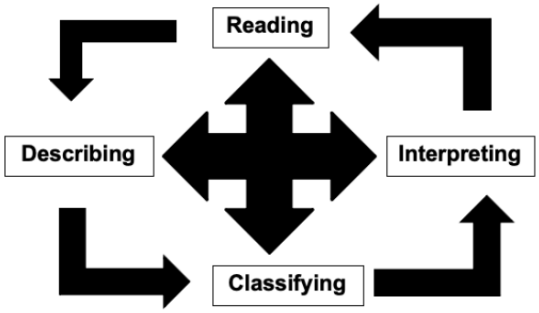


Figure 2 : Cyclical Process of Data Analysis

The analysis followed an iterative process of reading, describing, classifying, and interpreting data as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018). By filtering the data through this adapted Digital CA framework, the study systematically mapped how code-switching and chat features function structurally as deliberate, orderly interactional strategies rather than chaotic or deficient text patterns (Giles et al., 2015; Hutchby, 2021).

Questionnaire data were presented in tables and percentages to complement the qualitative chat log findings. Each chat log was coded using the labelling system shown in Table 3. 'Lf' denotes a chat log file, followed by a number identifying the specific log and a letter (A, B, C…) identifying the participant within that log.

Table 3: Participant Coding System for Chat Log Analysis

Log File	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D	Total Participants
Log 1	Lf1A	Lf1B	-	-	2
Log 2	Lf2A	Lf2B	-	-	2
Log 3	Lf3A	Lf3B	-	-	2
Log 4	Lf4A	Lf4B	-	-	2
Log 5	Lf5A	Lf5B	-	-	2
Log 6	Lf6A	Lf6B	-	-	2
Log 7	Lf7A	Lf7B	Lf7C	-	3
Log 8	Lf8A	Lf8B	Lf8C	-	3

(The table continues for Logs 9–15, it follows the same pattern.)

Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

Analytic consistency was supported through two checks: cross-referencing the coding of code-switching categories against the labelling scheme in Table 3, and triangulating chat log findings with questionnaire responses and examination script evidence. The study followed standard ethical research procedures throughout. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Education, and informed consent was obtained from every participant before data collection began. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; the participating schools appear throughout this article under pseudonyms (School A, School B, School C), and respondents are identified only

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through the non-identifying codes described earlier (e.g., R.A., Lf1A). All data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Results

This section reports the findings for each of the three research questions, drawing on the chat log analysis, questionnaire responses, and examination script data.

Characteristics of Chat Language (Research Question 1)

This section addresses the earlier stated Research Question 1, looking at the nature and characteristics of Malaysian secondary school students' use of chat language in WhatsApp interactions.

Greetings and Turn-Taking

The chat logs show students consistently opening exchanges with informal, creatively spelled greetings such as *'heloo,' 'yo,' and 'hiii.'* This spontaneity fits the off-the-cuff nature of online communication. These greetings work as conversational entry points much like they would face-to-face, and they also crop up whenever a new participant joins an ongoing conversation. Table 4 Presents Representative Examples Drawn Directly from The Chat Logs.

Table 4: Examples of Greetings in Chat-Based Interactions

Extract	Total Participants
Lf1/1	A: *heloo*
Lf1/2	B: *yes hiiii yi xin wt is it*
Lf14/1	A: *yo*
Lf14/2	A: *ru ok?*
Lf5/1	A: *hiii*
Lf5/2	B: *haluuuuu wt u wan*

Turn-taking, the back-and-forth exchange of messages between participants, showed up consistently across the chat logs. Each participant generally responded in sequence, keeping the conversation moving (Hutchby, 2021; Meredith & Stokoe, 2022). But it wasn't all smooth sailing: a closer look revealed frequent delays between turns, especially when one participant fired off several messages before getting a reply, as the exchange below illustrates.

A: eh — y em kids like sigma boys like sigma sigma boys (Lf3/3)
B: huehuehue (Lf3/4)
A: anywayssss — u remember ah d place we went yesterday? mixue or ai cha? (Lf3/7–8)
A: hah? hellooo? (Lf3/10)
B: mixue bruhh. let's gooo. u lanjer me k (Lf3/11–12)

As the example above shows, delayed responses sometimes broke the flow of conversation, prompting follow-up messages just to get attention back. That's likely down to two things: the time it takes to type out a message, and the lack of overlapping speech or instant feedback that face-to-face conversation has (Herring, 2021; Hutchby, 2021). Taken together, the greetings

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and turn-taking patterns show that chat-based interaction, digital as it is, is still socially organised in ways that closely mirror spoken conversation.

Code-Switching in WhatsApp Chats (Research Question 2)

This section looks at how Malaysian secondary school students use code-switching in WhatsApp conversations, addressing Research Question 2. Across the fifteen chat logs, code-switching showed up at four linguistic levels: lexical, phrasal, sentential, and end-particle. Table 5 summarises how often each type appeared across the dataset.

Table 5: Frequency of Code-Switching by Linguistic Level

Linguistic Level	Description	Frequency (N)
Lexical switching	Substituting a single word from another language within a sentence	42
Phrasal switching	Switching multi-word phrases from another language	31
Sentential switching	Alternating an entire sentence between languages	9
End-particle switching	Inserting discourse particles (e.g., lah, la, lor, meh) from another language	111

Lexical and Phrasal Switching

Lexical switching was the second most common form, behind end-particle switching. Students often dropped in Malay or Chinese words within English sentences, either to emphasise meaning or just to keep the conversation flowing, as in the exchange below:

A: if we don't run now lambat la we arrive (Lf4/1)
B: relaaaax… movie not gonna start lagi (Lf4/2)
A: yaaaa, tapi I like the ads before that (Lf4/3)
B: whattttt… ya la fine let's run…. jom! run! (Lf4/4–5)

Here, Malay phrases such as *lambat la, lagi, tapi, ya la,* and *jom* appear within English sentences to convey urgency and keep the conversation moving naturally. This also signals shared cultural and linguistic identity (Rahman, 2023; Lim & Tan, 2024). Phrasal switching, larger multi-word chunks, showed up less often (31 instances). These tended to carry culturally specific or emotional nuances that don't translate cleanly into English alone, for example: *'aku rasa line ni very slow today'* (Lf5/3) and *'kan duduk tengah hutan, tempat secluded far from tiang internet'* (Lf5/5).

Sentential and End-Particle Switching

Sentence-level switching was the rarest form (9 instances), typically used to convey factual information or affective emphasis in a single alternate-language sentence, as in: A: "*assignment ni bila nak hantar*" (Lf6/1); B: "*The deadline is tomorrow morning*" / "*oh no, we're in deep trouble*" (Lf6/2, Lf6/4). End-particle switching was by far the most dominant feature, occurring

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111 times across the fifteen logs. Particles such as *lah, la, lo, ler, leh,* and *mah* were commonly integrated into English sentences, for example: "Why don't you just do it *ler*?", "don't be late next time *la*", "Is the order right *ar*?". Consistent with (Chong et al.,2025) and (Rahman, 2023), end-particles such as *eh*, *ler*, *ma*, *liao*, and *ar* appeared more frequently among Chinese-identifying participants, while *la* was used more often by Malay-identifying participants, although *lah* and *la* appeared across all groups, reflecting their widespread use among Malaysians.

Code-switching also served to express shared emotion and group solidarity. For instance, in one exchange: A: "*pengsan* faster than the mosquitoes" (distress); B: "*kesian* u guys bully her" (pity); C: "*aiyo* bully who" (distress). Similarly, particles such as *meh, leh, lo, lor, liao,* and *ma* functioned as markers of ethnic and social identity within the chat community (e.g., "*har lo*!!!", "must *meh*?", "you all nv hear *meh*"), consistent with (Lim and Tan, 2024) and (Sari and Abdullah, 2022). The findings show that the code-switching patterns in these WhatsApp chats reflect students' multilingual competence, cultural identity, and social needs.

The Impact of Chat Language on Students' Writing (Research Question 3)

This section addresses Research Question 3, drawing on questionnaire responses, chat habits, and examination script analysis.

Chat Habits and Language Preference

Most students (45 respondents, 75%) said they chat online daily, spending 2–4 hours a day doing so. A large majority (54 respondents, 90%) reported mixing English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil while chatting; only 6 students (10%) stuck to English alone.

Table 6: Language Use and Code-Switching in Chats (N = 60)

Item	Category	n	%
Language preference	English only	6	10.0
	Mixture of languages	54	90.0
Code-switch while chatting	Switch	54	90.0
	Do not switch	6	10.0

Regarding appropriacy, 49 respondents (82%) reported that certain expressions are clearer in a language other than English, for example: "*To be more understandable to other chatters who sometimes are unable to understand them*" (R.C.); "*Sometimes when we want to use certain words, I mix language because it has more oomph*" (R.F.). All 60 respondents cited enjoyment as a reason, with 40 (67%) stating that code-switching adds "*spice*" to conversation: "*It is cool to mix languages when we chat*" (R.C.); "*When I don't want other people to know what me and my friends are talking about, I will mix the language. It is very interesting because it's like a secret code*" (R.D.). All 60 respondents also cited fluency, describing code-switching as saving time and cognitive effort: "*Because sometimes, I forget the word that I suppose to say but remember it in other languages*" (R.A.); "*It saves a lot of time trying to find the words in the*

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dictionary" (R.C.). Lastly, 30 respondents (50%) pointed to social norms: "It is a trend nowadays. We are considered out-dated if we don't mix the languages" (R.F.).

Chat Language in Daily Conversation and Formal Writing

A large majority of students (49 of 60, 81.7%) said they also use chat language features in daily offline conversation shows evidence that these features extend well beyond WhatsApp into students' everyday communicative habits. By contrast, only 5 students (8.3%) said they sometimes use chat language in formal English essays, while the remaining 55 (91.7%) said they don't. This points to a strong awareness that chat language doesn't belong in academic writing.

Table 7: Chat Language in Daily Conversation and in Formal Essays (N = 60)

Context	Uses Chat Language	Does Not Use	Total
Daily conversation	49 (81.7%)	11 (18.3%)	60
Formal essays	5 (8.3%)	55 (91.7%)	60

Even so, the examination scripts turned up isolated instances where informal digital communication features such as code-switching, emoticons, colloquial phrasing, made their way into written exam answers. Representative (anonymised) excerpts include:

> *"Okay, that just for the tips if you want more suggestions, you just call or mesej me. :)"*
> *"Hayoo my essay so kacip."*
> *"Unlike cats where we can find pickup from any Masjid. I think just take what your hearts desire la…"*
> *"There are many people at park so you can make new friends to lepak with while picnic… you can play basikal together with your new friend."*

These occurrences were limited and don't represent the majority of scripts. Still, they point to a possible unconscious transfer of informal digital habits into formal writing, even among students who otherwise know chat language doesn't belong in essays. Most students were clear about this awareness: "No, because chat language is created by ourselves. It is not suitable for writing essays" (R.C.); "No, it will only be getting worse because chat language is an informal language where it is not commonly used in daily conversation" (R.D.). At the same time, 26 students (43.3%) felt chatting could actually improve their English through incidental exposure to new vocabulary: "Yes, because I can learn some new words from my friends" (R.A.).

Chat, Engagement, and Academic Performance

All 60 respondents said chatting felt more engaging than face-to-face interaction. They cited benefits such as new friendships, stronger relationships, and a degree of anonymity that made communication easier ('Can make new friends from other countries or from other places,' R.A., 'Share our problem to someone who does not know me,' R.F.)." Academically, 49 respondents (82%) felt chatting helped them discuss homework and swap ideas ("Yes, I can improve my English language when I chat with friends from UK & USA," R.D.), while 11 (18.3%) saw it mainly as leisure with little academic value. Similarly, 40 respondents (67%) didn't see chatting as a waste of time, while 20 (33.3%) felt it could distract from studies. This same habitual

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engagement, which reinforces informal language patterns, may also support vocabulary growth and peer learning when guided appropriately.

Discussion

This study examined how Malaysian secondary school students use chat language and code-switching in WhatsApp conversations, and how these practices relate to their formal writing.

Characteristics of Chat Language

The findings show that these students treat chat language as a flexible, hybrid form of interaction. It blends spoken and written features instead of fitting neatly into either category (Herring, 2021; Meredith & Stokoe, 2022). Their messages tend to be short and conversational, shaped by the pace and limits of a platform such as WhatsApp. Abbreviations, acronyms, slang, emojis, and non-standard spelling all show up regularly. These largely function as tools for speed and emotional expression, not indicators of weak language ability (Yang, 2024).

The delayed and overlapping turn-taking seen in the chat logs looks unusual compared to face-to-face conversation, though it doesn't actually disrupt communication. It is simply what asynchronous digital interaction looks like (Herring, 2021; Hutchby, 2021). Students compensate for the absence of facial expression and tone of voice by leaning on paralinguistic tools such as emojis, punctuation, capitalization, and repeated letters. These tools are not merely decorative, they do real pragmatic work, anchoring emotional tone and reducing the risk of misreading in text-based conversation (Meredith & Stokoe, 2022).

Code-Switching in Chats

Code-switching proved central to how these students chat. It appeared at the lexical, phrasal, sentential, and end-particle level (Chong et al., 2025; Rahman, 2023). End-particle switching alone accounted for 111 of the 193 instances recorded. That weighting lines up well with the Markedness Model (Myers-Scotton, 1993), students appear to choose marked or unmarked forms deliberately, to achieve social goals like solidarity, identity assertion, or a softer tone with peers.

Mixing English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil in a single chat reflects Malaysia's multilingual environment. It also fits how Malaysian digital code-switching has been described elsewhere, a pragmatic, identity-marking strategy, not a linguistic deficit (Lim & Tan, 2024; Sari & Abdullah, 2022). Look closer at exchanges like the Lf4 and Lf6 excerpts and something else emerges too: more fluent participants modelling English structures for their peers, which lines up with Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978). This kind of exchange creates a supportive space where less proficient peers get regular, low-stakes exposure to authentic, contextualised vocabulary and structures that is consistent with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982). Code-switching in these chats functions as a deliberate communicative strategy, reflecting both multilingual competence and social need.

Impact on Writing

On the academic side, the questionnaire data are fairly clear. Most students know chat language does not belong in formal writing with 91.7% said they avoid it in essays altogether. That is a

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strong sign of register awareness, and it matches what Ibrahim and Kassim (2019) found. However, the examination scripts tell a somewhat different story. A handful of informal features did slip through, echoing concerns raised by Ahmad and Tan (2020), Lee and Ismail (2018), and Zulkifli and Ng (2017) about informal transfer into Malaysian students' academic writing even though at nowhere near the scale those earlier studies describe. This partial, limited transfer sits between the mostly negative picture painted by Crystal (2011) and Baron (2013), and the more optimistic view from Blake (2009), who frames digital communication as a driver of language development through authentic interaction. The findings suggest chat language isn't necessarily harmful to writing, provided students use it with awareness. It functions more as a complementary resource that supports communication and social engagement. Formal writing standards hold up well, so long as students' sense of register is reinforced by explicit teacher guidance (Rahman, 2023; Yang, 2024).

Implications of the Study

On this evidence, chat language poses little real threat to writing. Students already draw a clear line between informal chats and formal essays, and transfer into academic writing was minimal. This kind of register awareness is a strength teachers can build on, for instance, by explicitly contrasting informal and formal registers in class.

The findings show chat-based communication can support learning, not only distract from it. Students said chatting helps them improve their English and share ideas, while also building confidence. That is reason enough to bring guided use of platforms like WhatsApp into lesson, giving students authentic practice while still building accuracy.

Code-switching, too, is a strategic practice students use to express meaning and emotion, and to signal identity. Teachers should be cautious about discouraging it outright. Teachers can instead use it as a scaffold to build towards more standardized language in more formal contexts. In practice, chat language and code-switching can support learning, provided students are guided to keep informal communication and academic writing separate.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. The sample was relatively small and drawn from just three secondary schools. This limits how far the findings can be generalised to Malaysian students as a whole. Most participants were also higher-achieving students (English grade A or B). The results may therefore not fully capture how learners at other proficiency levels use language.

The reliance on chat logs and questionnaires is another constraint; these methods do not capture the full complexity of students' everyday digital communication, and interviews or observations would likely add depth on motivations and behaviour. And because the data were collected at a single point in time, the study cannot speak to how chat language might shape writing development over the longer term. A longitudinal design would be better placed to capture that.

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Conclusion

This study examined how mobile-mediated communication (MMC) affects the English writing skills of 60 secondary school students across three urban regions in Malaysia.

The structural analysis of WhatsApp communications showed that students' digital chat language is a highly flexible, hybrid form of writing. It combines informal greetings, paralinguistic cues, and text-based turn-taking. The study recorded 193 instances of code-switching across four linguistic levels. End-particle switching (111 instances) dominated by a wide margin, functioning as a strategic, identity-marking tool rather than a sign of weak language ability. Lexical (42 instances) and phrasal (31 instances) switching also appeared frequently, mainly to keep conversation flowing and emotion clear.

On academic literacy specifically, what students say and what shows up in their scripts don't fully line up. A large majority (91.7%) said outright that chat language does not belong in formal essays. Even so, the pre-screened examination scripts turned up a few isolated, minor instances of unconscious transfer, slang terms such as *lepak* and *kacip,* along with a handful of text-based emoticons. These occurrences were minimal. If anything, frequent digital engagement seems to give students useful opportunities for incidental vocabulary exposure and peer-to-peer scaffolding, not a negative influence.

This research suggests that chat language and code-switching function as cognitive and communicative assets rather than a serious threat to academic standards, provided educators actively support students in navigating the boundary between digital and formal writing.

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Author Contribution Statement: There is no doubt that I contributed substantially to the manuscript, including, the development of theory/data, methodology, and overall organization and supervision of research. Specifically, I collected, analyzed, and interpreted data, performed a literature review, wrote the initial version of the manuscript, and made substantial edits during the critical revision period. I also read, edited, proofread, and approved the manuscript before its submission.

AI Declaration During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Grammarly to assist with grammar, spelling, punctuation, and language refinement. The use of this AI-assisted writing tool was limited to improving the clarity and accuracy of the language. The author remains fully responsible for the content, ideas, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions presented in this manuscript and has reviewed and approved the final version.

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