

THE SOCIAL INFLUENCE ECOSYSTEM AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AMONG STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN MALAYSIA

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Article history

Received date : 10-7-2026
Revised date : 11-7-2026
Accepted date : 11-10-2026
Published date : 13-10-2026

To cite this document:

Mat Noor, N. N. N., & Awang, M. M. (2026). The social influence ecosystem and foreign language proficiency among students in higher education institutions in Malaysia. *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development (JISED)*, 11 (86), 1511-1526.

Abstract: *Foreign language proficiency has become increasingly important in higher education, as graduates are expected to communicate effectively across cultures, adapt to the global labour market, and establish international academic and professional networks. Nevertheless, the level of foreign language proficiency among university students continues to vary despite their participation in formal foreign language courses. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the social influence ecosystem, encompassing family support, peer influence, lecturers, and digital media, and its relationship with foreign language proficiency among students in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. To achieve this objective, the study employed a quantitative approach using a survey research design. A total of 464 HEI students enrolled in foreign language courses participated as respondents. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29 through descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis. The findings revealed that the level of social influence was high, whereas the level of foreign language proficiency was moderate. Furthermore, the correlation analysis indicated a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between social influence and foreign language proficiency. These findings demonstrate that support from family, peers, lecturers, and digital media plays a crucial role in fostering students' motivation, confidence, and opportunities to use foreign languages. From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Gardner's Socio-Educational Model, both of which emphasise the importance of social interaction and motivation in language acquisition. In terms of practical implications, the study recommends that higher education institutions expand collaborative learning, authentic communication activities, and the integration of digital media to enhance students' foreign language proficiency.*

Keywords: *social influence ecosystem, foreign language skills, foreign language learning, higher education institutions*

Introduction

Foreign language proficiency has become an increasingly important competency in higher education, as university students are no longer competing solely within the local academic environment. The rapid advancement of globalisation, the digitalisation of education, and the expansion of international labour mobility have made intercultural communication an essential requirement for graduates. In this context, foreign languages such as Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, German, French, and Korean are no longer viewed merely as elective subjects but as valuable assets that enhance students' academic opportunities, career prospects, and international social networks. Robertson (2021) emphasised that higher education in the twenty-first century should prioritise the development of global competencies, including the ability to communicate effectively across diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, foreign language proficiency should be regarded as an integral component of producing graduates who are capable of functioning successfully in the global community.

Although foreign language courses are increasingly offered by higher education institutions (HEIs), students' levels of proficiency remain inconsistent. Some students are able to acquire vocabulary, comprehend written texts, and use the language effectively in academic tasks, yet they still lack confidence when speaking or writing independently. These differences indicate that foreign language proficiency is influenced not only by formal classroom instruction but also by the broader social ecosystem surrounding students, including their families, peers, lecturers, and digital media. In this study, the social influence ecosystem refers to the social influences experienced by students through family support, peer interactions, lecturers' guidance, and exposure to digital media. These forms of social influence provide emotional encouragement, learning resources, language role models, constructive feedback, and wider opportunities for authentic communication.

Within the context of language learning, social interaction serves as a bridge between linguistic knowledge and practical language use. Students who receive encouragement from their families are generally more motivated to sustain their language learning efforts, while peers provide a less intimidating environment in which to practise communication. Lecturers act as facilitators by offering guidance, constructive feedback, and academic support throughout the learning process. Furthermore, digital media expands language input through videos, podcasts, social media platforms, language-learning applications, and online communities. Nasution (2022) reported that social media can facilitate language learning by improving vocabulary acquisition, reading skills, writing skills, and learners' motivation, provided that its use is appropriately guided.

Recent studies have also demonstrated that technology and digital learning significantly influence language proficiency. Buragohain et al. (2023), for instance, found that e-learning activities such as blog writing, online exercises, video production, and digital storytelling enhanced English language proficiency among engineering students in Malaysia. These findings suggest that language-learning experiences beyond the traditional classroom enrich students' linguistic development. Nevertheless, technology alone is insufficient unless students possess the motivation, social interaction, and supportive learning environment necessary to encourage continuous language use.

The primary issue underpinning this study is the disparity between opportunities to learn foreign languages and students' actual levels of language proficiency. Although students enrol in formal foreign language courses, their proficiency is often influenced by the frequency with which

they use the language and the support provided by their surrounding environment. Previous studies have predominantly focused on individual factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, language anxiety, and learning strategies. However, research integrating family support, peer influence, lecturers' guidance, and digital media as a comprehensive social influence construct within the context of Malaysian higher education remains limited. Addressing this gap is important because foreign language learning occurs within a complex social environment rather than as an isolated cognitive process.

In response to this research gap, the present study focuses on three primary objectives. First, it aims to determine the level of social influence among higher education students enrolled in foreign language courses. Second, it seeks to identify students' levels of foreign language proficiency. Third, it examines the relationship between social influence and foreign language proficiency. Specifically, this study contributes to the literature on foreign language learning by investigating the collective role of the social influence ecosystem, encompassing family, peers, lecturers, and digital media, within the context of Malaysian higher education. Such an investigation is expected to provide valuable insights for higher education institutions in designing more interactive, collaborative, and responsive foreign language learning strategies that address the needs of contemporary students.

Concepts and Operational Definitions

Social Influence Ecosystem in Foreign Language Learning

In the context of this study, the social influence **ecosystem** refers to the network of support, encouragement, social interactions, and social exposure experienced by students throughout the process of learning a foreign language. This ecosystem comprises four principal dimensions: family, peers, lecturers, and digital media. These dimensions are consistent with the study framework, which identifies family influence, peer influence, lecturers' support, and digital media as key components of foreign language learning. Each of these components contributes to shaping students' attitudes, motivation, confidence, and engagement in learning the target language.

More specifically, families provide both emotional and instrumental support to students. Such support may take the form of encouragement, moral reinforcement, recognition of the importance of foreign language learning, and the provision of learning resources. Peers, on the other hand, create a more relaxed environment for language practice through discussions, group assignments, academic collaboration, and healthy competition. Through interactions with peers, students have greater opportunities to use the target language in less formal settings, thereby enhancing their confidence in communication. Lecturers also play a significant role as knowledgeable facilitators who provide guidance, constructive feedback, error correction, and academic support. This role is consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which posits that learning occurs through social interaction with more knowledgeable individuals. In foreign language learning, guidance from lecturers, peers, and family members enables students to develop their language skills progressively through scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Furthermore, digital media constitutes an important component of the social influence ecosystem in foreign language learning. Exposure to social media platforms, online videos, discussion forums, podcasts, and language-learning applications enables students to access broader and more authentic language input. Nasution (2022) argued that the use of social media

in language learning enhances students' motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and overall language comprehension. Consequently, digital media functions not only as a source of information but also as a flexible platform for language practice beyond the traditional classroom environment. Moreover, foreign language learning extends beyond the memorisation of vocabulary and the mastery of grammatical structures. Language is fundamentally a social practice through which individuals construct meaning, establish relationships, and develop identities within authentic communicative contexts. Therefore, students require learning environments that provide opportunities to listen, read, imitate, speak, and write in meaningful situations. A supportive environment encourages students to practise using the target language despite making mistakes, thereby facilitating continuous language development.

Accordingly, a positive social influence ecosystem enhances students' confidence, reduces communication anxiety, and encourages more active use of foreign languages. Emotional and academic support from family members, lecturers, peers, and digital media also strengthens students' motivation and engagement in foreign language learning (Hosseini et al., 2022; Zakaria et al., 2024). Overall, the social influence ecosystem not only provides valuable learning resources but also creates meaningful communicative opportunities that contribute to the development of speaking, reading, and writing skills in foreign languages.

Foreign Language Proficiency

In this study, foreign language proficiency focuses on three fundamental language skills: speaking, reading, and writing. These three competencies represent the core language skills that students are expected to develop during foreign language learning at the higher education level. Speaking proficiency refers to students' ability to communicate ideas, information, and opinions orally using appropriate pronunciation, sentence structures, and vocabulary. Reading proficiency involves the ability to comprehend written texts, identify explicit and implicit meanings, and make appropriate inferences from the information presented. Writing proficiency, meanwhile, refers to students' ability to produce grammatically accurate, coherent, and well-organised written texts that are appropriate for specific communicative purposes. This classification is consistent with the conceptual framework of the present study, which conceptualises foreign language proficiency in terms of speaking, reading, and writing skills. In addition, foreign language proficiency should not be viewed solely as an academic achievement. Within higher education, language proficiency is closely associated with students' ability to use the target language effectively in academic, social, and professional contexts. Students with higher levels of language proficiency are better equipped to comprehend international academic resources, participate in student mobility programmes, communicate with native speakers, and enhance their employability in the global labour market. This perspective aligns with Robertson (2021), who argued that twenty-first-century higher education should emphasise the development of global competencies, including effective communication across culturally diverse settings.

Furthermore, developing foreign language proficiency requires continuous practice and exposure beyond formal classroom instruction. Students are expected not only to understand vocabulary and grammatical rules but also to apply the language effectively in authentic communicative situations. Buragohain et al. (2023) found that e-learning activities such as blog writing, online exercises, video production, and digital storytelling significantly enhanced students' language proficiency, particularly in reading, writing, and vocabulary development. These findings suggest that language learning through practical and technology-enhanced activities enriches students' linguistic experiences. In addition, foreign language proficiency is

influenced by students' self-confidence and active engagement throughout the learning process. Wang et al. (2024) demonstrated that self-efficacy and classroom goal structures are positively associated with students' engagement in foreign language learning. Students who possess greater confidence in their own abilities are more likely to practise the target language through speaking, reading, and writing activities. Conversely, students with lower self-confidence may avoid using the foreign language due to concerns about making mistakes.

Therefore, foreign language proficiency should be understood as a gradual developmental process. Students typically begin by acquiring basic competencies, such as understanding simple vocabulary and constructing basic sentences, before progressing to more advanced language use in academic writing, discussions, and intercultural communication. Consequently, consistent practice, authentic opportunities for language use, and support from the surrounding social environment are essential for enabling students to achieve higher levels of foreign language proficiency.

Literature Review

Social and Family Influences on Language Learning

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that foreign language learning in higher education is influenced by a combination of social, emotional, technological, and pedagogical factors. Within the context of twenty-first-century higher education, Robertson (2021) argued that higher education institutions should cultivate global competencies to prepare students for the evolving demands of the international workforce and global society. Accordingly, foreign language proficiency functions not only as a means of communication but also as a mechanism for developing intercultural awareness, expanding international networks, and enhancing students' adaptability in global environments. Consequently, investigating the factors that facilitate foreign language proficiency has become increasingly important, particularly within the context of higher education institutions.

Evidence specifically addressing family influence also suggests that the home environment can be relevant to language development. Xu et al. (2024), in a study of 975 first-year university students in China, examined family environment and English proficiency and reported associations involving family socioeconomic status and parenting styles. In a separate mixed-methods study of Chinese university students learning English as a foreign language, Guo et al. (2025) found that parental involvement significantly predicted several dimensions of language-learning motivation. These studies provide empirical support for considering family influence as part of the wider social environment; however, they focus on English-language learning in China and do not establish that the same patterns necessarily apply to students learning Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, German or French in Malaysian higher education.

Digital Media and Technology-Enhanced Language Learning

From the perspective of educational technology, Buragohain et al. (2023) reported that e-learning activities significantly improve language proficiency when students actively and continuously engage in meaningful learning experiences. Activities such as blog writing, online exercises, video production, and digital storytelling provide authentic opportunities for students to apply the target language in practical contexts. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of technology depends not merely on the availability of digital platforms but also on how students utilise these technologies and the quality of support they receive from lecturers and peers. Therefore,

technology should be regarded as an integral component of the social learning environment rather than merely as an instructional tool.

In addition, social media has increasingly been recognised as an informal platform for foreign language learning. Nasution (2022) explained that social media contributes positively to language learning by enhancing vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, writing skills, and learners' motivation. In today's digital era, students are able to access diverse forms of authentic language input through short videos, online reviews, discussion forums, podcasts, and culturally rich digital content produced in the target language. However, one of the major challenges is ensuring that such exposure is utilised productively rather than being limited to passive entertainment. Consequently, lecturers play an essential role in guiding students to integrate digital media use with meaningful language-learning objectives.

Classroom Climate, Peer Interaction and Learner Engagement

Furthermore, the social climate within the classroom has a substantial influence on students' engagement in foreign language learning. Hosseini et al. (2022) found that classroom social climate, foreign language enjoyment, and student engagement are closely interconnected in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning context. These findings suggest that positive emotional experiences and supportive social relationships encourage greater student participation. When students feel psychologically safe to experiment with the target language without fear of making mistakes, they are more willing to take communicative risks, participate actively, and develop greater linguistic confidence.

Despite these benefits, digital media also presents certain challenges. Shu et al. (2023) found that problematic social media use may be associated with classroom anxiety, perfectionism, and language achievement. This finding indicates that digital media does not automatically produce positive learning outcomes. Excessive, unstructured, or socially comparative use of digital platforms may instead negatively affect students' language learning experiences. Therefore, investigations into social influence should conceptualise digital media as a factor that may function either as a source of support or as a potential challenge, depending on how it is utilised. Another important factor identified in the literature is students' self-efficacy and engagement in foreign language learning. Wang et al. (2024) demonstrated that classroom goal structures and self-efficacy significantly influence students' engagement in foreign language learning, with certain variations observed across gender. Students who possess stronger confidence in their abilities are generally more willing to participate actively in language-learning activities. In this regard, support from lecturers and peers can strengthen students' self-efficacy by providing constructive feedback, language models, and encouragement to communicate using the target language.

Evidence from Malaysian and Regional Language-Learning Contexts

Research conducted within Malaysia and neighbouring regions further reinforces the significance of social factors in foreign language learning. Zakaria et al. (2024) investigated the social learning strategies employed by undergraduate students studying foreign languages and found that attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation were critical components of successful learning strategies. These findings are consistent with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which emphasises that learning occurs through observation, imitation, and social interaction. Similarly, Yahaya et al. (2025) reported that social factors such as socioeconomic background, motivation, and personality significantly influence second language acquisition among polytechnic students. Collectively, these studies indicate that language learning should

be understood as the product of interactions between internal learner characteristics and external social influences.

From the perspective of digital pedagogy, Ooi and Hashim (2023), through a systematic review, concluded that digital storytelling enhances ESL students' speaking skills by promoting collaborative learning, peer feedback, and technology integration. Likewise, Karupayah et al. (2024) demonstrated that digital storytelling improves both speaking proficiency and student engagement. Although these studies highlight technology as an instructional strategy, their effectiveness primarily stems from the social interactions established during the planning, production, revision, and presentation of language-related tasks. In other words, technology becomes more effective when integrated with collaborative activities and meaningful social feedback.

Synthesis and Research Gap

A distinction is needed between second-language (L2) learning and foreign-language learning. Several studies discussed above concern English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL), often in settings where English has a particular institutional or societal role. Their findings offer useful insights into social interaction, motivation and digital learning, but they should not be generalised automatically to learners of Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, German or French. These languages differ in writing systems, phonology, cultural distance, opportunities for interaction outside class and availability of learning resources. The present study includes foreign-language learners, but the manuscript must report the languages represented in its sample before language-specific comparisons or broader generalisations can be justified.

Overall, the literature indicates that foreign language proficiency cannot be adequately explained by a single factor. Rather, language learning is influenced by the dynamic interaction among technological resources, social support, positive emotions, self-efficacy, motivation, and pedagogical strategies. Although previous research has extensively examined technology, motivation, and learning strategies, relatively little attention has been devoted to investigating social influence as a comprehensive construct. This gap is particularly important because students are simultaneously influenced by multiple social agents, including their families, peers, lecturers, and digital media. Moreover, many previous studies have concentrated on a single dimension, such as social media, digital storytelling, or specific pedagogical approaches. Other studies have focused exclusively on one target language or a single educational institution, thereby limiting a broader understanding of foreign language learning across higher education contexts. Consequently, the present study contributes to the field of foreign language education by examining the relationship between a comprehensive social influence ecosystem and foreign language proficiency among students in higher education institutions in Malaysia.

Theory/Model

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) serves as the primary theoretical foundation of this study because it explains that learning occurs through social interaction, cultural experiences, and environmental influences. In the context of foreign language learning, students do not develop language proficiency independently; rather, they acquire linguistic knowledge and skills through interactions with individuals and learning resources within their social environment. Therefore, this theory is highly relevant to the present study, which examines the social influence ecosystem, encompassing the roles of family, peers, lecturers, and digital media

in supporting students' foreign language proficiency. According to Vygotsky (1978), cognitive development first occurs at the social level before being internalised at the individual level. This principle suggests that students develop stronger foreign language proficiency when they are provided with opportunities to interact, receive guidance, and use the target language in meaningful communicative contexts. Accordingly, interactions with lecturers, peers, and family members help students build confidence while progressively improving their speaking, reading, and writing skills.

An equally important concept within Vygotsky's theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what learners can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance from more knowledgeable individuals. In the present study, lecturers, more proficient peers, supportive family members, and digital learning resources may all function as More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs). Through the assistance provided by these sources of support, students are able to perform language-learning tasks that would otherwise be beyond their independent capabilities. Furthermore, the concept of scaffolding explains the temporary instructional support provided to learners until they are able to perform language tasks independently. Such support may include pronunciation correction, sentence modelling, constructive feedback on writing, guided dialogue practice, vocabulary explanation, and exposure to the cultural contexts of the target language. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) further argued that second and foreign language learning should be understood as fundamentally social processes involving interaction, mediation, and the use of cultural tools. Consequently, Sociocultural Theory provides a robust theoretical foundation for explaining how foreign language proficiency develops through supportive social environments.

Gardner's Socio-Educational Model

Gardner's Socio-Educational Model (1985, 2010) is adopted to explain the influence of motivation, attitudes, and the social environment on foreign language learning. This model proposes that successful language learning depends not only on learners' linguistic abilities but also on their attitudes towards the target language and its speech community. Within the context of this study, the social influence ecosystem is viewed as an important factor that shapes students' motivation to learn and use foreign languages. Furthermore, Gardner distinguished two primary forms of motivation, namely integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation refers to students' desire to engage with the target language community, understand the culture of its speakers, and interact with individuals who use the language. Meanwhile, instrumental motivation refers to students' desire to gain practical benefits, such as academic opportunities, employment prospects, international mobility, and career development. In this regard, support from family members, encouragement from peers, guidance from lecturers, and exposure through digital media can strengthen both forms of motivation.

Moreover, when students learn within an environment that values foreign language proficiency, they are more likely to perceive language learning as meaningful and worthwhile. For example, families may provide moral encouragement, peers may create opportunities for language practice, lecturers may offer academic guidance and constructive feedback, while digital media can increase exposure to authentic language use and cultural content. Consequently, Gardner's Socio-Educational Model provides a valuable explanation of how the social influence ecosystem shapes students' attitudes, motivation, and willingness to communicate using foreign languages.

Relationship Between the Theories and the Study

Drawing upon these two theoretical perspectives, the social influence ecosystem can be understood as a learning environment that connects students with multiple forms of social support. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory explains how interaction and guidance facilitate the gradual development of foreign language skills, whereas Gardner's Socio-Educational Model explains how supportive social environments foster positive attitudes and sustained motivation towards foreign language learning. Overall, the integration of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Gardner's Socio-Educational Model provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for this study because both perspectives recognise that foreign language learning does not occur in isolation. Instead, foreign language proficiency develops through continuous interactions between learners and their surrounding social environment. Consequently, these theoretical perspectives provide strong support for the present study, which investigates the relationship between the social influence ecosystem and foreign language proficiency among students in higher education institutions in Malaysia.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach using a survey research design. Such a design was selected because the study aimed to determine the level of the social influence ecosystem, assess the level of foreign language proficiency, and examine the relationship between these two variables among students in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Malaysia. According to Creswell (2014), a quantitative approach is appropriate when variables are measured objectively and analysed using statistical procedures. Within the context of this research, the survey design enabled data to be collected from a large number of respondents while providing a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of students enrolled in foreign language courses. Additionally, this study adopted a correlational design, as its primary objective was to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between the social influence ecosystem and foreign language proficiency. Unlike experimental designs, a correlational design does not seek to establish causal relationships; rather, it is used to determine whether variations in one variable are associated with changes in another. Accordingly, the findings of this study should be interpreted in terms of associations between variables rather than as evidence of direct causality.

In terms of the study population, the target respondents comprised students enrolled in foreign language courses at higher education institutions in Malaysia. A total of 464 respondents participated in the study, exceeding the minimum sample size recommended by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). Participants were selected from students who were currently undertaking foreign language courses and voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. To ensure alignment between the sampling strategy and the data collection process, purposive sampling was employed to obtain respondents from various foreign language courses, academic disciplines, and higher education institutions. This sampling approach was considered appropriate because the online questionnaire distribution depended on respondents' willingness and accessibility to participate.

Regarding the research instrument, data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting of three sections. Section A gathered respondents' demographic information, including gender, institution, field of study, and the foreign language being studied. Section B measured the social influence ecosystem, which comprised four dimensions: family, peers, lecturers, and digital media. Section C evaluated foreign language proficiency, focusing on speaking, reading, and writing skills. All measurement items in Sections B and C were assessed

using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). To establish the suitability of the instrument, face validity and content validity were examined through expert evaluation involving specialists in linguistics and social science research. Moreover, a pilot study involving 30 students was conducted to assess the clarity of questionnaire items and determine the reliability of the instrument. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for the research constructs ranged from 0.76 to 0.89. According to the guidelines proposed by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), these values demonstrate satisfactory internal consistency. Hence, the questionnaire was considered reliable for consistently measuring the intended constructs.

For the data collection procedure, responses were gathered through Google Forms and distributed via email, social media platforms, and with the support of lecturers teaching foreign language courses. Prior to questionnaire completion, respondents were provided with information regarding the purpose of the study, confidentiality of responses, and voluntary participation. Subsequently, incomplete or invalid responses were excluded before conducting the data analysis. Following the screening and data-cleaning procedures, all collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29. Descriptive statistics were applied to obtain frequencies, means, and standard deviations. The interpretation of mean scores followed these categories: 1.00–2.33 (low), 2.34–3.66 (moderate), and 3.67–5.00 (high). Furthermore, Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the social influence ecosystem and foreign language proficiency. Statistical significance was determined at $p < .05$, while the strength of correlation coefficients was interpreted based on Cohen's (1988) guidelines, whereby coefficients approaching 1.00 indicate stronger relationships.

Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on the three main research objectives: (i) to identify the level of the social influence ecosystem, (ii) to determine the level of foreign language proficiency, and (iii) to examine the relationship between these two variables. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation analysis. Descriptive statistics were employed to describe the mean scores and standard deviations, while Pearson's correlation analysis was used to determine the direction, strength, and significance of the relationship between the social influence ecosystem and foreign language proficiency.

Based on Table 1, the mean score for the social influence ecosystem was 3.79 with a standard deviation of 0.77. This mean score indicates a high level, suggesting that the majority of respondents received substantial encouragement, support, and social exposure throughout the process of learning a foreign language. These findings indicate that students do not rely solely on formal classroom instruction but also benefit from support provided by their surrounding social environment. The results further suggest that family members, peers, lecturers, and digital media serve as important sources of support that help students develop motivation, confidence, and opportunities to use a foreign language.

Table 1: Level of the Social Influence Ecosystem among Higher Education Students

Construct	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
Social Influence Ecosystem	464	3.79	0.77	High

Referring to Table 2, the mean score for foreign language proficiency was 3.49 with a standard deviation of 0.66. This result indicates that students' foreign language proficiency was at a moderate level. The findings suggest that students have acquired a satisfactory foundation in foreign language skills; however, their proficiency has not yet reached a high level. From an application perspective, students are likely capable of understanding learning materials, recognising basic vocabulary, and using a foreign language for specific academic tasks. Nevertheless, they still require more consistent practice to improve their speaking fluency, communication confidence, and writing clarity. Therefore, these findings indicate that students' foreign language proficiency can be further strengthened through continuous practice, authentic communication activities, and greater exposure to the language beyond the classroom.

Table 2: Level of Foreign Language Proficiency among Higher Education Students

Construct	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
Foreign Language Proficiency	464	3.49	0.66	Moderate

As shown in Table 3, Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between the social influence ecosystem and foreign language proficiency among higher education students ($r = 0.785$, $p < 0.001$). This result indicates that both variables move in the same direction, meaning that the higher the level of social support received by students, the higher their level of foreign language proficiency. Furthermore, the p-value below the significance level of 0.05 confirms that the relationship is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis, which states that there is no significant relationship between the social influence ecosystem and foreign language proficiency, is rejected. These findings demonstrate that support from family members, peers, lecturers, and digital media is strongly associated with students' speaking, reading, and writing proficiency in a foreign language.

Table 3: Pearson Correlation between Social Influence and Foreign Language Proficiency

Variables	r	p	Decision
Social Influence and Foreign Language Proficiency	0.785	0.001	Significant

Discussion

The findings indicate that the social ecosystem was at a high level among higher education students enrolled in foreign language courses. This suggests that students do not learn a foreign language in isolation; instead, they receive support from their families, peers, lecturers, and digital media. In the context of foreign language learning, such support is essential because language acquisition requires active use, continuous feedback, and repeated exposure to the target language. More specifically, family encouragement strengthens students' instrumental motivation, particularly when family members perceive foreign language proficiency as an added value for career advancement and academic mobility. Meanwhile, peers provide a more relaxed and less intimidating environment for language practice. Lecturers play a vital role in guiding accurate language use through explanations, corrections, and constructive academic feedback. At the same time, digital media complements the learning experience by providing

authentic language input through videos, films, music, podcasts, mobile applications, and online communities. From a theoretical perspective, these findings are consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which emphasises that learning occurs through social interaction. When students interact with more knowledgeable individuals or richer learning resources, they receive scaffolding that enables them to progress toward higher levels of language proficiency. Furthermore, these findings also support Gardner's Socio-Educational Model (2010), which proposes that a positive social environment strengthens learners' attitudes and motivation towards the target language. Within the higher education context, students' motivation is shaped not only by personal interest but also by social influences that recognise the value of foreign language proficiency. Nevertheless, the role of digital media should be viewed from a balanced perspective. Although digital media makes language learning more flexible and less dependent on formal classroom instruction, Shu et al. (2023) argued that problematic social media use may contribute to anxiety, perfectionism, and disruptions to language learning outcomes. Therefore, higher education institutions and lecturers should guide students in using digital media purposefully, particularly for vocabulary development, pronunciation practice, cultural understanding, and authentic communication.

Beyond social support, the findings also revealed that students' foreign language proficiency was at a moderate level. This result suggests that although students have acquired a satisfactory foundation in foreign language learning, their proficiency has yet to reach an advanced level. This situation is understandable because foreign language courses in higher education institutions are generally offered for a limited duration, with language use often confined to academic contexts. Consequently, students require longer periods of exposure, authentic communicative practice, and consistent opportunities to use the language beyond the classroom. Based on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, this finding can be explained through the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Students remain at a developmental stage where their language proficiency can be enhanced through appropriate guidance and meaningful opportunities for practice. Conversely, when language learning focuses primarily on written exercises, vocabulary memorisation, or grammatical knowledge, the development of spontaneous speaking and writing skills is likely to progress more slowly. Therefore, activities such as dialogue simulations, group discussions, presentations, digital storytelling, and interactions with native speakers can help students connect their linguistic knowledge with authentic language use. These findings also suggest that foreign language proficiency should be strengthened through more student-centred learning approaches. In this regard, technology should be utilised as a complementary learning tool, integrated with social activities that promote interaction, language production, and constructive feedback. Consistent with this view, Buragohain et al. (2023) reported that active e-learning activities positively influence language learning outcomes. Accordingly, language learning applications, online videos, and digital platforms should be integrated with tasks that require students to produce language, receive feedback, and reflect on their own learning.

One of the principal findings of this study is the existence of a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between the social ecosystem and foreign language proficiency. This finding indicates that students who receive greater social support tend to demonstrate higher levels of foreign language proficiency. Although this relationship does not establish a direct causal effect, it provides empirical evidence that the social ecosystem is closely associated with foreign language development. Drawing upon Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), this relationship suggests that interactions with lecturers, peers, family members, and digital learning resources facilitate language development through guidance and meaningful language

use. Furthermore, the findings support Gardner's Socio-Educational Model (1985, 2010), which argues that a supportive social environment promotes both integrative and instrumental motivation. Students who receive stronger social support are more likely to perceive foreign language learning as valuable and are therefore more willing to invest time in learning, practising, and using the language. This relationship can also be interpreted through Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), which proposes that learners acquire behaviours and strategies by observing social models. Students learn language skills by observing lecturers who use the target language, peers who confidently communicate in the language, or digital content creators who produce educational materials in the target language. When these social models demonstrate positive examples, students become more confident in imitating, practising, and improving their own language use. Similarly, Zakaria et al. (2024) found that social learning strategies play an important role in foreign language learning among undergraduate students. Nevertheless, the findings also highlight an important gap that warrants attention. Despite the high level of the social ecosystem, students' foreign language proficiency remained at a moderate level. This suggests that the existing social support has not yet been fully translated into intensive language practice. Therefore, support from family members, peers, lecturers, and digital media should be complemented by structured learning opportunities that enable students to use foreign languages more frequently, actively, and meaningfully.

Implications of the Study

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the importance of integrating sociocultural, socio-educational, and social learning perspectives in understanding foreign language proficiency. The findings demonstrate that language proficiency should not be viewed solely as an individual achievement but rather as the outcome of interactions between individual characteristics and the surrounding social environment. Within this framework, Vygotsky's theory explains the mechanisms of social guidance and scaffolding, Gardner's model highlights the relationships among attitudes, motivation, and language learning, while Bandura's theory emphasises the role of observation and social modelling in language acquisition.

From a pedagogical perspective, foreign language lecturers should create classroom environments that encourage meaningful interaction. Activities such as pair discussions, role-playing, project-based learning, interviews, digital storytelling, and short presentations can increase students' opportunities for language production. In addition, lecturers should provide constructive feedback that encourages students to view mistakes as an integral part of developing language proficiency rather than as failures.

At the institutional level, higher education institutions can strengthen the foreign language learning environment by establishing language clubs, organising language weeks, speech competitions, international forums, language partner programmes, collaborations with embassies or cultural centres, and interaction sessions with native speakers. Such initiatives transform foreign language learning from a classroom subject into a meaningful social practice. Furthermore, institutions may develop digital repositories containing instructional videos, podcasts, interactive exercises, and culturally appropriate learning resources tailored to students' proficiency levels.

From the students' perspective, the findings indicate that they should actively utilise the social support available to them. Students can establish small language practice groups, participate in online language communities, consistently engage with target-language content, maintain reflective journals, and practise speaking regularly. Consequently, digital media should be

regarded as a platform for language practice rather than merely a source of entertainment. Such a proactive approach is essential because foreign language proficiency cannot be developed solely through the credit hours allocated to formal language courses.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be proposed. First, lecturers are encouraged to design learning activities that integrate social interaction with technology, such as collaborative digital storytelling, foreign language vlogs, video reviews, and online discussion forums. Second, higher education institutions should introduce language mentoring programmes that connect newly enrolled students with more proficient language learners. Third, language-related activities should be extended beyond the classroom to provide students with greater opportunities to use the target language in authentic contexts. In addition, the use of digital media should be implemented within a pedagogically structured framework. Lecturers can provide curated lists of reliable learning resources that are appropriate for students' proficiency levels and assign reflective learning tasks to ensure that students engage actively rather than passively with digital content. At the same time, higher education institutions may establish virtual international collaborations, such as online cultural exchange sessions with students from countries where the target language is spoken. Such initiatives can enhance students' integrative motivation while providing more authentic opportunities for intercultural communication.

For future research, scholars are encouraged to examine the individual dimensions of the social ecosystem separately to determine whether family, peers, lecturers, or digital media serve as the strongest predictors of foreign language proficiency. In addition, future studies may adopt a mixed-methods approach by incorporating interviews or focus group discussions to gain deeper insights into students' learning experiences. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to investigate changes in language proficiency following specific social or digital interventions over time. Furthermore, future research could include additional variables such as motivation, self-efficacy, language anxiety, learning strategies, and the use of artificial intelligence in language learning. More advanced analytical techniques, including multiple regression analysis or structural equation modelling (SEM), may also be employed to examine both direct and indirect relationships among the study variables. Finally, comparative studies across different foreign languages are warranted, as learning Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, German, or French may involve distinct challenges related to writing systems, pronunciation, access to native speakers, and the availability of learning resources.

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the level of the social influence ecosystem, determine the level of foreign language proficiency, and examine the relationship between these two variables among higher education students in Malaysia. Overall, the findings revealed that the social ecosystem was at a high level, whereas students' foreign language proficiency was at a moderate level. Pearson's correlation analysis further demonstrated a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between the social ecosystem and foreign language proficiency. Based on these findings, the study confirms that social support is a crucial factor in foreign language learning. In general, foreign language proficiency should be understood as a social process that requires guidance, motivation, language role models, and opportunities for meaningful communication. Support from family members, peers, lecturers, and digital media can enhance students' confidence while broadening their learning experiences. Nevertheless, the moderate level of language proficiency suggests that existing social support must be translated into more active,

continuous, and authentic language practice. Therefore, higher education institutions should develop language learning environments that integrate formal classroom instruction, collaborative learning activities, digital technologies, and real-world communication opportunities. From a theoretical perspective, this study strengthens the applicability of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Gardner's Socio-Educational Model, and Bandura's Social Learning Theory within the context of Malaysian higher education. From a practical perspective, the findings provide valuable guidance for lecturers and higher education institutions in designing language learning interventions that are more socially interactive, engaging, and relevant to students' everyday lives. Ultimately, it is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to improving foreign language proficiency among higher education students and support the development of graduates who are better equipped to compete in an increasingly globalised and multilingual environment.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for the support and facilities provided throughout the conduct of this study. The authors also extend their appreciation to all individuals and parties who contributed, directly or indirectly, to the successful completion of this research.

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