Cultivating Care in the Classroom: Bridging Cultural Approaches in Malaysian and UK Higher Education

Dr. Shakiratul Hanany

Senior Lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia

hanany@ums.edu.my

Shakiratul Hanany received her PhD in Education from the Department of Education Studies at the University of Warwick in 2024. She currently holds the position of Senior Lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia. Her recent doctoral research focused on innovating teaching methods in English language education in Malaysia, specifically investigating virtual drama as a potential alternative pedagogy for ESL learners. Her research interests encompass a broad spectrum of educational topics, including Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), drama, virtual drama, technology-enhanced language teaching, care ethics, reflective practice, and creative pedagogy. This highlights her dedication to investigating innovative methods that enrich the educational experiences of both students and educators.

Abstract

This paper investigates the role of care in the classroom by examining the impact of a care-infused virtual drama approach on English as a Second Language (ESL) learners at two Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), incorporating teacher reflections and insights from student interviews. Due to the prevalence of power imbalances (Nawi, 2014) and authoritarian practices (Tee et al., 2018) in Malaysia, this paper further explores the perspectives of three Malaysian Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) at the University of Warwick to understand their experiences and understanding of the notion of care within the context of a UK higher education institution. Through one-on-one semi-structured and pair interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams, these GTAs shared how they manifest care and provide support for their learners at the University of Warwick. The insights from Malaysia and the UK accentuate the significance of fostering care in diverse educational environments, revealing its potential to enhance students' engagement and well-being across cultural and institutional settings.

Keywords:

Overview of My Virtual Drama Project

I commenced my doctoral studies at the University of Warwick in 2019. However, during the planning phase of my research, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a reassessment of my methodological approach. Initially, my research design involved conducting drama sessions in person; however, the global lockdowns and restrictions imposed because of the pandemic required a transition to a virtual format. Therefore, I had to adapt conventional drama strategies to a virtual platform as it was essential for ensuring the feasibility of drama activities in the online context. In this study, Microsoft Teams was utilised as our main platform for the virtual drama. The study was conducted across two cycles in two HEIs in Malaysia, involving low-proficiency ESL learners as participants. Each cycle lasted for six weeks; each week, a 90-minute virtual drama session was conducted with student participants who volunteered to take part.

My rationale for employing virtual drama as an alternative for low-proficiency ESL learners was to counter the teacher-centered methodology ubiquitous in Malaysia (Abdul Samat, 2016; Pandian, 2002) and to address the learners' communication difficulties and apprehension towards language learning. Despite eleven years of English language education, Malaysian students still demonstrate insufficient English literacy skills (Che Musa et al., 2012). This issue is not unique to Malaysia but is prevalent in various contexts where English is spoken as a second or foreign language. As Chang (2012) notes, it can be challenging for teachers to elicit responsiveness from students in the classroom, often leading some teachers to compensate for the silence by filling it with their own talk due to students' lack of participation.

Therefore, I sought to address this issue and uncover solutions for enhanced language learning. Amid the global COVID-19 outbreak, I delved into virtual drama pedagogy, thoughtfully aligning the module design to cater to the needs of ESL learners Malaysian HEIs, and part of this was conducting a Needs Analysis. In this effort, I attempted to establish a 'safe' space for the students, in which the 'ethics of care' (Freebody & Finneran, 2021; Gallagher & Turner-King, 2020; Gkonou & Miller,

2019; Held, 2006; Nicholson, 2002; Noddings, 2013; Thompson, 2020; Turner-King, 2019) were central. Thompson (2020:41) defines the 'ethics of care' as valuing genuine connections between individuals and groups, characterised by a sense of responsibility for others and a corresponding commitment to helping them. Freebody and Finneran (2021:15) advise us that the key to governing ideas in drama in these unprecedented times are 'play, fun, hope and love', and further assert that:

> These philosophical discourses can be seen to intersect with drama work in these times in particular ways; hope as resistance, the aesthetic affect, the importance of imagination and fun and an ethic of care.

Freebody and Finneran's assertion highlights a profound connection between drama and key philosophical concepts—play, fun, hope, and love—that become particularly significant in unprecedented times, such as during the recent COVID-19 crisis. The ethics of care they mentioned reinforce the idea that drama, especially during challenging times, must be rooted in empathy and emotional support. This ensures that students feel valued and supported, which is crucial for their emotional well-being. When integrated into drama pedagogy, ethics of care can create a more compassionate classroom environment, empowering students to actively engage in their learning while also addressing their emotional needs.

Because the learners were geographically dispersed during the pandemic, the question of whether it was possible to be caring in these circumstances arose. However, Held (2006:18) reminds us that even when participants are more distant, the same qualities of 'attentiveness, responsiveness to needs, and understanding situations from the points of view of others' should define caring. This necessitates a commitment to understanding and also a willingness to invest diverse efforts.

Implementation and Impacts of Care Ethics in the Virtual Drama Classroom

In the context of virtual drama, which was a novel and potentially risky experience for ESL learners in Malaysia, cultivating care ethics was vital for providing a supportive

learning environment. By prioritising care ethics, I aimed to create a space that promotes care, trust, collaboration, and engagement. Therefore, in this section, I will detail part of the practices adopted in this study, alongside the impacts on the ESL learners. This section highlights the importance of care ethics within the context of virtual drama education in Malaysia, offering valuable insights for those who may find these practices applicable to their own institutional settings.

It is important to note that my virtual drama participants provided consent for the use of screenshots containing their images, and I also explicitly stated in the consent form that the data collected would be used in future work arising from my PhD.

Implementing the Care Ethics

In essence, to implement the care ethics, I emphasised on understanding the students' needs and building relationship with the students. For me, this was a crucial step in reforming educational practices within this context. In a study by Tee and Samuel (2017:93) on teacher practices in Malaysia, the empirical evidence demonstrates that:

> The relationship between teachers and students is more respectful than warm. Most teachers seem to make attempts at connecting with individual students' learning needs, interest and personality but mostly at a superficial level.

In my view, although respect is fundamental to a productive environment in teaching and learning, the lack of warmth can inhibit students from fully engaging in the process. A more profound emotional connection between teachers and students is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and engagement. Hence, in my study, understanding students' needs and building relationship were central to my pedagogical practice.

Firstly, a Needs Analysis was conducted prior to designing my virtual drama module; this was part of my commitment to care, aligning with the idea that care advocates are typically 'concerned with caring attitudes that have the right kind of relation to persons' needs', signifying that we ought to focus on 'need-fulfilment' (Collins, 2015:55). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ESL learners and instructors in various Malaysian HEIs to understand the students' needs from two

perspectives. Through the Needs Analysis, I was also able to identify the challenges these students faced with virtual learning during the pandemic, which became fundamental in my lesson planning. Since drama is unfamiliar to the ESL learners in my context, I also had to carefully consider how to scaffold the drama activities, especially when they were conducted fully virtually. Nicholson (2002:85) advises that the concepts of 'care' and 'trust' are often intertwined, and that 'providing appropriate support and intervention allows students to build trust gradually'. Therefore, part of my strategy was implementing a structured approach in order to support and scaffold learners' participation. This involved progressively introducing strategies from simple to more complex as the lessons advanced, coupled with demonstrations to familiarise them with the new approach. The objective was to reduce their inhibitions and enhance engagement throughout the drama course.

In terms of building relationship with the learners, part of the considerations was focusing on reducing power imbalances, and actively co-participating in the drama activities. These approaches will be further explained in the following section, where I will also outline the impacts of my care ethics on the ESL learners.

The Impacts of My Care Ethics

In this section, I will discuss the impacts of my care ethics within the context of Malaysian ESL learners. Before going into the discussion, I will provide a brief reflection on my teaching identity.

Prior to commencing my PhD studies at the University of Warwick, I had been teaching English in Malaysia since 2011. Upon arriving in the UK, I experienced a sense of disconnection from my teaching identity, as I was not a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) and therefore had limited opportunities to engage with students in a teaching capacity. The Department of Education Studies had chosen me to deliver tutorials to undergraduate students, for which I was grateful, but this was a one-off occasion which occurred in Week 9 of a previous term.

Nonetheless, as I embarked on this research journey, I was able to reconnect with students again—this time, surprisingly, in a much deeper way. This deeper connection was likely a result of my use of drama as a pedagogy and the deliberate adoption of care ethics. Students were apparently open with me and willing to share

their personal experiences. Upon reflection, this level of openness was not something I had encountered with my previous students while in Malaysia. For instance, one student in the study has openly shared with me about the depression she was facing by reaching out to me personally via WhatsApp.

In my view, discussing the issue of depression requires a significant level of trust in the individual with whom one is sharing. Another student, when interviewed in the focus group, only revealed *assignment load* as the stressor, but when we had our personal interview, she was more open to talk about her situation that was apparently far worse than she had described in the focus group, revealing other stressors including *family problems* and *unconducive learning environment* as she is living in a long house. In Malaysia, a traditional longhouse refers to a house that can accommodate a maximum of thirty families (Sarawak Tourism, n.d.). In a study conducted by Brown (2020), he found that students perceive teachers as having a significant role in reducing stressors in their learning environment, not only through their teaching methods but also through their *attitudes* towards teaching and students. In this sense, I suggest that the adoption of care ethics helped to foster a trusting environment where the learners were more open to share their feelings.

As mentioned in the previous section, part of my care ethics involved cultivating positive relationships with students. One of the key things I did was consciously reducing the power imbalance between myself and the students. However, in my view, having a degree of authority and not *totally* relinquishing it was helpful for me to manage both the drama and the students, especially when everything was done virtually. This aligns with Neelands' (2009:183) suggestion that successful collaboration in 'ensemble-based' learning, such as drama, often involves the uncrowning of the power of the director/teacher' indicating that teachers should relinquish some of their authority in the classroom.

When I attempted to embrace this approach, it developed a close bond between me and the students. This close bond, as indicated by the learners, made it easier for them to communicate with me, and they felt more comfortable opening up about themselves. Significantly, this also afforded them the confidence to speak up in English, which is their second language (L2). Moreover, the students evidently felt empowered to express themselves without fear of judgment. It was noteworthy that

students talked about how they became more spontaneous in the virtual drama sessions. For instance, in an interview, one student commented:

> Before attending surely I'm not too confident […] because in English class I will just write on paper and talk. I'm not the spontaneous person. So after the session I will be like okay, just talk when you feel confident, yeah. I just talk. [S1]

The above excerpt illustrates the connection between spontaneity and confidence, affording her the courage to articulate her ideas in an impromptu manner. Her comment resonated with the comment made by another student, where she described that even if students make mistakes in my class, they felt supported, and this encourages continued participation. In contrast, in other classes, this student mentioned that mistakes are often met with immediate reprimands, resulting in her feeling overwhelmed, hindering her ability to process information and proceed with the task at hand. Her comment illustrates authoritarian practices, which is prevalent in Malaysia. Tee et al. (2018:137) explain the cyclical nature of these authoritarian practices within the context:

> Many of the teachers who went through the same education system in Malaysia were once students who also viewed teachers as the authority and deferred to this control. Nonetheless when stepping into the other side of the hierarchy, from being students to being teachers, teachers displayed few difficulties in assuming authoritarian characteristics during classroom discourse. Interestingly, at different time or settings, one can dutifully be an obedient student or also comfortably be an authoritarian, monologic teacher. This reflects the cyclic set roles and expectations for each hierarchy level, and more importantly the faithful submission to and execution of this structure.

My exposure to drama pedagogy, combined with my experience in the UK education system which is more student-centered and non-authoritarian, compelled me to break this cycle. Nonetheless, student-centered approaches, having originated in the West and align with the Western emphasis on the individual, raise important questions regarding their applicability and relevance in the contexts of developing countries where the learning cultures are different (O'Sullivan, 2004). Consequently, it was essential to implement this approach to assess its impact on students in a developing country, such as Malaysia. hooks (2003) provides another important

justification for my argument, as she posits that authoritarian practices can dehumanise learners, stifling the creative and transformative potential that emerges from active engagement in learning.

Furthermore, Noddings (2013:67) posits that 'the recognition of caring by the cared-for is necessary to the caring relation'. In this study, it was noteworthy that the students indeed acknowledged my efforts to demonstrate care. For instance, one student commented:

> It's so hard because lecturer or teacher before this they are so serious. And when I learn I feel not confident in English. [...] Your communication with others are different *like* (from) teachers and lecturers before this. [S2]

Another student commented:

> Translation:

> ...normally for English classes […] I have never attended a class like this, where the lecturer is always supportive of the students... [S3]

The students' excerpts above also highlight the teacher-student power imbalance prevalent in our culture, which, in my view, needs to be transformed. As noted by the students above, they felt that my approach differed from what they were used to in their classroom. Relinquishing some of my authority and stepping away from traditional teacher roles has notably transformed me into a more approachable, friendly, and engaging teacher, rather than one perceived as overly serious. This shift has also turned me into a supportive teacher rather than a detached one. This aligns with hooks' (2003:44) critique of authoritarian approach, where the seriousness of the teacher renders the learning experience 'repressive and oppressive' by stripping away elements of fun. I suggest that removing the elements of enjoyment and playfulness from the learning process can hinder learners' engagement, which can ultimately diminish their motivation to participate.

In addition, my openness to engage as an active co-participant and maintain a playful demeanour in the virtual drama also fosters a positive relationship with the students, thereby establishing trust. Shown in Figure 1 is the screenshot from one of

the virtual drama activities in which I was an active co-participant, who was about to throw an 'imaginary ball' to a student:
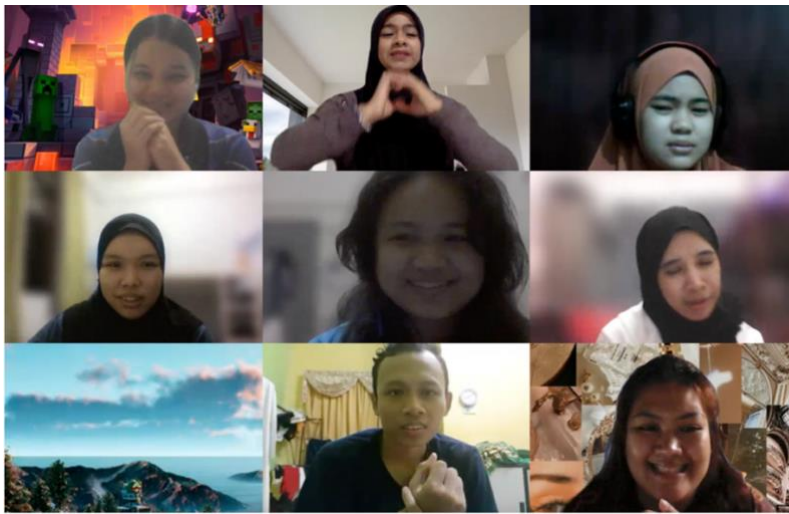

Figure 1: Screenshot of the 'Topic Tag' activity (adapted from Trefor-Jones, 2020)

There was evidence of student engagement when I actively co-participated in the drama activities, and the impact it had on the students seemed promising. For instance, one student commented in the chat box on my willingness to exhibit a 'silly' expression, in-role, in front of the screen:

> You were so into the character and *kami terdorong untuk* (we were inspired to) be free with our expression too. We were feeling comfortable to go on with our characters. It was fun and not awkward. [S4]

This aligns with Delahunty et al.'s (2014:250) assertion that accessing others' ideas requires a willingness to disclose, which is contingent on the presence of trust, which can only be developed interpersonally over time. However, in this context, our trust-building was established relatively rapid. Building trust and relationship were crucial in encouraging the ESL students—particularly those who felt insecure and anxious—to engage in both in-role and out-of-role virtual drama activities. This was important considering the students were not familiar with the drama approach, and for most of them, this was their first encounter with drama. The fact that they needed to do drama virtually in English which is their L2, heightened the need for easing their apprehension. Therefore, when I actively co-participated in the virtual drama

activities, there was evidence of learner engagement, thereby easing their apprehension and motivating them to perform.

The empirical data from my study also indicates that by providing students with opportunities to practise social interactions both in and out of role, and by emphasising strong bonding and trust, we also collaboratively cultivated and sustained an 'ecology of care' (Gallagher & Turner-King, 2020:142). This fostered positive relationships and a sense of belonging, with some students even remarking that it felt less like a class and more like being with family. Many students expressed their sadness during our final session, leaving heartfelt messages in the Team's chat box and voicing their sadness in the focus group that the programme was coming to an end.

In summary, with the right approaches, it is indeed possible for educators to be caring in virtual environments. Through intentional strategies that prioritise relationship building, communication, engagement, and student well-being, educators can create nurturing environments that foster meaningful connections, even at a distance.

Reflections of Malaysian GTAs at Warwick

Following my recent experience with ESL learners in Malaysia during my doctoral studies in the UK, I spoke with three Malaysian PhD students (Fiza, Sheeda, and Naemah), who are GTAs at the University of Warwick, to gain their perspectives on the notion of care. Sheeda had one year of experience as a GTA at Warwick Business School (WBS), along with 15 years of combined teaching experience in higher education institutions (HEIs) in both Malaysia and the UK. In contrast, Fiza and Naemah had three and two years of experience as GTAs in the Department of Law and the Department of Chemistry, respectively. Prior to becoming a lawyer in Malaysia in 2016, Fiza had been tutoring in Malaysia since 2011. Naemah, on the other hand, taught for one year at a Malaysian HEI before transitioning to industry in 2013. In sum, all three GTAs had prior teaching experience in Malaysia before coming to the UK to pursue their PhDs. A one-on-one semi-structured interview was conducted with Sheeda, while Fiza and Naemah participated in a paired interview,

both of which were held via Microsoft Teams. The interviews were video-recorded, and they also provided consent for their real names to be used.

The reasons why I chose to interview them were twofold. First, having not had the opportunity to be a GTA, I was curious about their experiences and wanted to learn more about them first hand. Second, coming from Malaysia, where there exists a power imbalance (Nawi, 2014) and authoritarian practices are prevalent (Tee et al., 2018), I was interested in their perspectives on student-centered and caring approaches. This is particularly noteworthy given their experiences in both the Malaysian and UK education systems, which could provide unique insights into the subject matter. As mentioned earlier, based on my own experience doing my PhD in the UK, the education system reflects a non-authoritarian and student-centered approaches, which are ubiquitous in the West (O'Sullivan, 2004). Moreover, Malaysian educational practices are often influenced by cultural values that emphasise discipline, as well as respect for elders and those of higher social status. For instance, in a traditional Malay context, questioning what individuals with higher social status say is deemed inappropriate (Jeannot & Khairil Anuar, 2012; Mahfooz et al., 2004, as cited in Nawi, 2014) and confrontation is often avoided (Jeannot & Khairil Anuar, 2012, as cited in Nawi, 2014). This may lead to an emphasis on obedience and compliance among students. In contrast, in the UK, Zhang (2021:239) notes that the education system 'encourages students to be authority-challengers, facilitating students to rationalize and focus on the precision and accuracy of information', which resonates well with what I experienced. Being a PhD student in the UK, I felt valued, respected, and supported, and this has ultimately contributed to my overall personal growth.

Significantly, in my interviews with them, it was apparent that they indeed had distinctive ways to manifest care for the students, and even went above and beyond in supporting their students' learning at the University of Warwick. It is important to note that these GTAs had their sessions in person, rather than virtually. Nonetheless, it was remarkable that most of their experiences corroborated with what I had practised in my care ethics in my recent study. Just as my exposure to drama pedagogy and the UK education system has influenced my perspective on teaching approaches, I believe these Malaysian GTAs' experiences here may also have some impact on their pedagogical methods.

The interviews have uncovered their significant experiences regarding the notion of care in their context of being GTAs, which could potentially be something that other GTAs and educators could learn from, and replicate (if applicable) in their practice to foster a more supportive learning environment for their students. In the following sections, I will highlight the ways in which these three Malaysian GTAs manifest care towards their students at the University of Warwick. This will be presented under three sub-headings: *Leveraging the Unique Position of the GTA, Supporting Students and Exhibiting Empathy,* and *Building Positive Relationships.* These sections will be followed by a concluding section, *Cultivating Care in the Classroom: A Practical Guide*, offering insights for those interested in implementing similar approaches in their own classrooms.

Leveraging the Unique Position of GTA

In our interviews, they shared the view that GTAs hold a unique position, being closer in status to students compared to module leaders. For instance, Fiza commented:

> …for GTA, they know who is their student. They know their weaknesses. They know who is the most brilliant in class. They know who speak the most, who keep quiet the most. So they are very personal to the student. They have the personal touch to each of the students…

This unique position allows GTAs to have more open and trusting relationships with students, closely connect with and support their holistic experiences rather than just their academic performance. It is significant that Sheeda's comment also resonates with what Fiza mentioned. She commented:

> …probably because we are GTA, […] so we can be more approachable in terms of […] the relationship wise, between the GTA and the students, because sometimes they have a gap between them and the module leader, because the module leaders like high in the ranking. […] they feel like they are more closer [sic] to us […] because GTA is student as well. So probably we can share

experiences in terms of studying in the UK […] experiences in you have, like, common, common values there, because you're a student as well, other than just being a GTA itself.

Sheeda's comment above highlights the ways in which GTAs can leverage their position due to their closer proximity to students as being fellow students themselves, which include sharing of experiences and common values. Additionally, Fiza also mentioned that because GTAs generally know and recognise each and every student in the class due to leading smaller seminar groups (only around 15 students for the Department of Law where she is based), this affords her the opportunity to personalise her support. For instance, Fiza shared how she provided personalised guidance and accommodate diverse learning needs, such as adjusting deadlines and presentation requirements for students with disabilities or other special needs. In her words:

> …in lecture, it will normally be 300 students, 400 students. So the lecturer […] cannot see one by one, but we as a GTA, we can see them personally, 15 people in class. […] So we know everyone by name. We know what happened to them. We know why they don't come to class, and especially for neurodiverse student […] like the ones that have disability. So we need […] to know what kind of disability that they have to make sure that we can tailor our way of teaching. Okay, for example, one of my students who is autism [sic], what I need to do, is not to allow or not to ask her to present in front of the class, because it will be over stimulating for her. And for my ADHD student, I will not give him the due date in the class, for example. Okay, guys, you have 10 minutes for discussion, but for that person, you are allowed to […] do your thing for as much as you can.

While previous research indicates that the dual nature of GTAs' roles as both researchers and teachers can create tension and uncertainty about their responsibilities (Clark et al., 2021), Fiza's comment above accentuates the significance of this unique position of GTAs in fostering a nurturing and supportive learning environment for the students. As they often lead smaller seminar groups, GTAs can develop a more intimate relationship with their students. In Muzaka's (2009) research, many students found it advantageous to have GTAs lead small group seminars, as their recent university experience provides them with added

14

insight and understanding of what approaches are most effective in this context, which aligns well with Fiza's comment. Moreover, GTAs can also provide one-on-one assistance, addressing students' specific concerns. In Fiza's case, she goes out of her way to help students with diverse needs. This personalised approach will in turn help students feel more valued and supported in their academic journey at the University of Warwick.

Supporting Students and Exhibiting Empathy

The unique role of GTAs also allows them to empathise with their students, enabling them to patiently support and guide them both in the classroom and the lab. For instance, Naemah, a GTA at the Department of Chemistry, highlighted the value of drawing on her own experiences as student to better understand and relate to the challenges faced by her students. In her experience doing laboratory demonstrations, she endeavoured to build confidence in students, especially the international students who always seemed rather more nervous about handling lab equipment. Citing her background as an Asian, where being 'spoonfed' is culturally common, she explains how this ostensibly negative connotation translates into her being protective of her students during laboratory demonstrations:

> …we have usually three people at one lab experiment. So most of my friends usually ask [sic] me, you don't need to teach them everything. So they usually let the student do on their own, but then on my side, because we are usually being taught on every little detail, […] spoon feed, yeah […] But then I think it's matter of safety also, because I don't want to let them get accident, then I teach them. It's better I teach you before you get into accidents.

Fiza corroborated Naemah's point by commenting on something similar. She recounted how her students appreciated and recognised her efforts to ensure they truly understand her lessons and enjoy her class. Her efforts include providing small gestures like giving out little presents and also doing a Kahoot! quiz at the end of the seminar. On top of that, Fiza also talked about her efforts to ensure her students truly understand her lessons, which contrasts the approach of some other GTAs whom she has previously observed:

I have seen my friend, my peer when I did observation to my peer teaching. I can see that when they teach, they don't really care whether the student understand or not, but that is not my style. I will make sure they really understand. So for example, for complex legal principle, I will make a table in front of them. So this is how we demonstrate the law that, and this is the exception. So in that way, when they see the law is being tabled, one by one, it becomes more structured, and it is not like big idea for them.

The comments from the GTAs highlight their strong sense of empathy and a sincere commitment to supporting their students' learning and well-being. Their willingness to go beyond conventional GTA teaching responsibilities reflects a deep understanding of their students' needs, both academically and emotionally. These GTAs' approaches to empathising with students and addressing their needs resonate well with my own adoption of care ethics in my virtual drama, which involves recognising students' needs to ensure they align with my pedagogical approaches. These caring approaches can foster a more supportive and engaging learning environment; when learners feel supported, this will help improve their well-being. Baik et al. (2019) argue that there is limited knowledge about the measures universities can implement to support students' mental wellbeing. This poses a problem as research indicates that a significant proportion of higher education students are facing well-being challenges, including 'psychological and emotional distress, feelings of anxiety and depression, and an increased risk of burnout' (Backhaus et al. 2020; Baik et al., 2019; Dopmeijer, 2021, as cited in Douwes et al., 2023:1). Remarkably, insights from these GTAs go on to show that GTAs can play a significant role in addressing this issue.

Building Positive Relationships

In my interview with Sheeda, she highlighted several strategies and approaches that GTAs could adopt to foster positive relationships with students. Sheeda contrasts her approachable and friendly demeanour with the more rigid methods she has observed among her colleagues back in Malaysia, where they tend to be more serious and maintain a clear barrier between themselves and their students. She emphasised the

importance of GTAs having a positive and close relationship with their students, so they can pinpoint when students may be struggling, as rigid instructors may miss these signs. By establishing this kind of relationship, which involved her opening up to them, encouraged her students to do the same. Sheeda commented:

> I think that […] the students open up more with the GTA because probably it depends on the approach of the GTA itself, […] like, my approach is more of […] a friendlier approach to the students. So, […] when in class, usually what I do is I, I share, like real experiences, my experiences, so they appreciate that. So […] when I open up, they open up as well. So I think that's, that's one of the relationship that I think I created between me and the students.

This approach Sheeda adopted is similar to what I practised in my care ethics. As mentioned earlier, my friendly and approachable demeanour in my virtual drama sessions encouraged students to open up about themselves, allowing me to learn about the issues they were facing, such as depression, which undoubtedly affected their well-being.

Furthermore, Sheeda also highlighted the ways in which GTAs can build relationships with the students in order to better support them by replicating the systems that she was used to back when she was in Malaysia, and also here in the UK. In Malaysia, she had a "mentor-mentee" system, where students would have a Personal Academic Advisor who would be looking after the students from Year 1 until they graduate, which she thinks could be a good practice to replicate. She described the "mentor-mentee" system as one where the mentor (the personal advisor) and the mentee (the student) meet every fortnight to discuss anything related to academic or personal matters, including any challenges they face at university. This role, I believe, is similar to the role of a personal tutor at the University of Warwick, except that a mentor would meet their mentee more regularly (once every fortnight), as Sheeda described. Moreover, Sheeda also recommended GTAs to replicate the coffee sessions her module leader practices here in the UK. In her words:

> …back in Malaysia […] we have […] the mentor-mentee, the personal, *Penasihat Academic* (Personal Academic Advisor). Here, we don't, I don't see that. But then what, what the module leader does that I see that […] we can replicate that is, he will, he will dedicate one, I think, two hours in a week, like they would put, like a

day and time that he will sit in the cafe, and any students of his class can come and, you know, come and sit and talk to him about anything.

Sheeda's comment suggests the importance of creating informal opportunities for students to express themselves, especially for those who may not feel confident speaking up in class. She mentioned that casual interactions, such as having coffee or engaging in a relaxed conversation as practised by her module leader, provide a valuable space for students to open up and share their thoughts and concerns. She further highlighted the value of GTAs replicating the "mentor-mentee" system, or even the weekly coffee session, as these moments of informal dialogue can help GTAs better understand their students' needs and challenges, allowing for deeper connections and more personalised support. For her, this approach encourages GTAs to be more approachable, where students feel comfortable communicating outside the formal classroom setting.

Sheeda's suggestion to engage students in informal conversations resonated well with my own approach. When teaching the ESL learners through virtual drama, part of my strategy to build relationships was by having a WhatsApp group specifically set up for the students to engage in informal conversations, and significantly they also utilised other platforms such as Microsoft Team's chat platform for this purpose. This approach aligns with Beins' (2016:157) contention that 'informal communication enables students to be thinking and feeling beings', thereby contributing to the development of a robust learning community. Beins (2016:161) further highlights the value of informal communication online as we can make use of punctuation and emojis 'to communicate positive affect', apart from sharing personal stories. Significantly, this resonated well with what my students and I experienced. For instance, through informal communication such as WhatsApp, there was evidence of students connecting with one another to share their personal stories; it was also through this medium that one of my students expressed her issues with depression to me.

Therefore, engaging in informal conversations, whether in person or virtually, plays a crucial role in enhancing relationship building among students and educators. These interactions create a relaxed atmosphere where individuals feel

comfortable expressing themselves, sharing personal experiences and stories, and developing trust. As a result, this informal communication fosters a supportive learning environment that encourages engagement and a deeper connection between educators and students.

Cultivating Care in the Classroom: A Practical Guide

Based on my own insights and that of the three GTAs presented in this article, I would like to propose a practical guide on *how* care can be cultivated in the classrooms across cultural and institutional settings:

1. Understanding students' needs (formally and/or informally)
    a. Formally: Conducting a Needs Analysis
    b. Informally: Creating informal communication spaces
2. Building positive relationships
3. Scaffolding our teaching
4. Providing *personalised* support wherever possible
5. Exhibiting empathy for students
6. Reducing power imbalances

Drawing from the above guide, cultivating care in the classroom requires a nuanced approach, yet is entirely feasible to implement. At the core, this approach involves understanding students' needs, whether through formal mechanisms like a Needs Analysis or by fostering informal spaces for communication. Building positive relationships is equally essential, as trust and rapport form the foundation of a caring environment. By scaffolding instruction and providing personalised support, we can guide students through challenges while respecting their individual learning capabilities.

Furthermore, the insights from this article also highlight the crucial role of empathy in teaching and learning. In environments where authoritarian practices dominate, making a conscious effort to reduce power imbalances not only nurtures a more caring and supportive atmosphere but also gives students a voice. I suggest

that this requires a change not only in long-held perspectives but also in practices. Ultimately, this caring and supportive environment can foster both student engagement and personal well-being, ensuring that students are supported academically and emotionally.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of care ethics in virtual drama pedagogy has proven to be an effective approach in enhancing the language learning experience of low-proficiency ESL learners in Malaysia. Additionally, insights from Malaysian GTAs at the University of Warwick further emphasise the unique and impactful role of GTAs in establishing caring atmosphere for students. As intermediaries between students and faculty, GTAs are positioned to build closer, empathetic relationships with students, enabling them to offer personalised support for their students. These findings highlight the transformative potential of care-centered teaching methods to create supportive learning environments, promoting not only learner engagement but also student well-being.

Looking ahead, these findings could have a significant impact on teaching and learning. In contexts where authoritarian practices are prevalent, educators might reflect on embracing care ethics as a means to enhance and transform existing teaching practices. Moreover, educators across different contexts, subjects and educational levels should consider embedding care ethics into their pedagogical approaches to promote a more caring form of education. By doing so, educators can create more welcoming and supportive environments, giving students a voice and thereby enabling them to actively participate in their learning journey. For future research, it would be valuable to explore how care-centered pedagogical practices can be scaled and adapted in diverse educational contexts, including those outside language learning and HEIs. Finally, further exploration into the role of technology in facilitating care-infused learning environments could provide deeper insights into how digital tools can enhance student engagement in remote or hybrid learning environments.

Ethical Claim

The study (virtual drama) has been granted approval by the Department of Education Studies, ensuring that it meets the university's ethical standards. Informed consent has been obtained from all participants (virtual drama participants and the GTAs), guaranteeing that they are fully aware of the nature, purpose, and potential impacts and outcomes of the research, and have voluntarily agreed to participate. I confirm that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this research.

References

Abdul Samat, N. (2016). *"In this class automatic my words come out": Implementing process drama in two Malaysian English language-learning contexts.* PhD thesis. University of Waikato.

Baik, C., Larcombe, W. & Brooker, A. (2019) "How universities can enhance student mental wellbeing: The student perspective," *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(4): 674–687. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1576596 (Accessed 5 March 2023).

Beins, A. (2016). Small talk and chit chat: Using informal communication to build a learning community online. *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, 26(2): 157-175.

Brown, P. (2020) "Research into student mental health: Where have we come and how can we improve?," *Journal of Public Mental Health*, 19(1): 9–12.

Chang, L. S. (2012). Dramatic Language Learning in the Classroom. In: Winston, J. ed. *Second Language Learning Through Drama.* London: Routledge.

Che Musa, N. C., Lie, K. Y. & Azman, H. (2012). Exploring English language learning and teaching in Malaysia. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies*, 12(1): 35-51.

Clark, L., Hansen, J., Hastie, A., Kunz, S., Standen, A. & Thorogood, J. (2021). Introduction to postgraduate pedagogies: Centring graduate teaching assistants in higher education. *Postgraduate Pedagogies*, 1(1): 7-26.

Collins, S. (2015). The Core of Care Ethics. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Delahunty, J., Verenikina, I. & Jones, P. (2014). Socio-emotional connections: identity, belonging and learning in online interactions. A literature review. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 23(2): 243–265. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/1475939x.2013.813405 (Accessed 20 July 2020)

Douwes, R., Metselaar, J., Pijnenborg, G. H. M. & Boonstra, N. (2023). Well-being of students in higher education: The importance of a student perspective. *Cogent Education*, 10(1): 2190697.

Freebody, K. & Finneran, M. (2021). *Critical themes in drama: Social, cultural and political analysis*. Oxon: Taylor & Francis.

Gallagher, K., & Turner-King, R. (2020). Performing a museum of living memories: Beholding young people's experiences and expressions of care through oral history performance. In: Fisher, A. S & Thompson, J. eds. *Performing care*. Manchester: Manchester University Press: 139-155.

Gkonou, C., & Miller, E. R. (2019). Caring and emotional labour: Language teachers' engagement with anxious learners in private language school classrooms. *Language teaching research*, 23(3): 372-387.

Held, V. (2006). *The ethics of care: Personal, political and global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. New York: Routledge.

Muzaka, V. (2009) The niche of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs): Perceptions and reflections. *Teaching in Higher Education,* 14(1): 1-12.

Nawi, A. M. (2014). *Applied drama in English language learning.* PhD thesis. University of Canterbury.

Neelands, J. (2009). The Art of Togetherness: Reflections on Some Essential Artistic and Pedagogic Qualities of Drama Curricula, *NJ Drama Australia Journal,* 33(1): 9-18. Available from: 10.1080/14452294.2009.12089351 (Accessed 21 July 2021).

Nicholson, H. (2002). The Politics of Trust: Drama Education and the ethic of care la politique de la confiance: Education par le theátre et l'eáthique de la responsabilitéá la política de la confianza: La educación del arte dramático y la ética del cuidado. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 7(1): 81–91. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/13569780120113157 (Accessed 8 July 2021).

Noddings, N. (2013). Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education (updated). Berkeley, CA and Los Angeles: University of California Press (Original work published 1984).

O'Sullivan, M. (2004). The reconceptualisation of learner-centred approaches: A Namibian case study. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *24*(6), 585-602.

Pandian, A. (2002). English language teaching in Malaysia today. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 22(2): 35-52. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/0218879020220205 (Accessed 20 January 2020).

Sarawak Tourism. (n.d.). *A Sarawak Longhouse Experience* https://sarawaktourism.com/blog/a-sarawak-longhouse-experience

Tee, M. Y., & Samuel, M. (2017). Teachers and teaching in Malaysia. In: Samuel, M., Tee, M. Y. & Symaco, L. P. eds. *Education in Malaysia: Developments and challenges*. Singapore: Springer: 85-99.

Tee, M. Y., Tan, S. Y., & Symaco, L. P. (2018). Socio-historical transformation and classroom discourse in Malaysia. *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación*: 5(2): 123-142. Available from: https://doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.14516/ete.212 (Accessed 5 September 2024)

Thompson, J. (2020). Towards an aesthetics of care. In: Fisher, A.S. & Thompson, J. eds. *Performing care: New perspectives on socially engaged performance.* Manchester: Manchester University Press: 36-48.

Trefor-Jones, G. (2020) *Drama Menu at a Distance – 80 Socially Distanced or Online Theatre Games.* London: Nick Hern Books.

Turner-King, R. (2019). 'Questioning collaborative devising in a post-truth era: Crafting theatre *with* youth', *Youth Theatre Journal*, 33(2): 94–106. Available from: 10.1080/08929092.2019.1688212 (Accessed 21 July 2021).

Zhang, B. (2021). A comparison between pedagogical approaches in UK and China. *Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education*, 13(5): 232-242.