

Exploring Students' Reactions and Preferences in Learning CTU552 Philosophy and Current Issues: A Qualitative Study

Nurul Badriyah Ali¹, Syazwani Abd Rahim^{1*}, Syaimak Ismail², Amni Haslinda Alpandi³

¹ Akademi Pengajian Islam Kontemporari, Universiti Teknologi Mara Kampus Segamat, Johor, Malaysia

² Akademi Pengajian Islam Kontemporari, Universiti Teknologi Mara Kampus Arau, Perlis, Malaysia

³ Jabatan Kejuruteraan Petroleum, Fakulti Kejuruteraan Kimia dan Tenaga, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Skudai, Johor

* Corresponding Author: syazwanirahim@uitm.edu.my

Received: 30 December 2023 | Accepted: 25 January 2024 | Published: 1 March 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajress.2024.6.1.7>

Abstract: *The educational paradigm these days has changed with the increasing interest in student-centred learning (SCL) approaches. Hence, students' learning experiences must be highlighted to facilitate them in achieving effective learning outcomes. The focus of this study was on Philosophy and Current Issues because this course is considered less favoured among students and more difficult compared to other courses, but it is compulsory for all students in higher institutions. Thus, this study aimed to identify UiTM Johor Branch students' reactions and to explore their preferences in learning CTU552 Philosophy and Current Issues. In this qualitative study, primary data were collected using questionnaires with open-ended questions that required respondents to self-record their answers via a Google form. Questionnaires were distributed to students in UiTM Johor Branch, who registered for this course for two semesters. The period of study included the October 2022 to February 2023 semester and the March to July 2023 semester. This study collected 157 answers from students involved in this survey. This study found that the respondents enjoyed learning CTU552 because of the attractive methods of delivery, the instructor's personality, the good environment, the life practices, and the provision of new knowledge. There were several challenges in learning this subject because of difficulty, but most respondents were attracted to the uniqueness of the philosophies that were able to explain current issues. This study also found that the respondents preferred simple and understandable explanations, and a fun and stress-free environment, with the inclusion of attractive activities, such as quizzes, games, and additional materials. In conclusion, it is important to highlight these students' reactions and preferences to ensure an effective learning session.*

Keywords: Reactions, Preferences, Philosophy, Teaching, Learning

1. Introduction

Student-centred learning (SCL), also referred to as personalised learning, is an opportunity for students to deal with the material they are learning and how they learn it. In contrast to teacher-centred approaches, SCL engages students as leaders and decision-makers in their own learning. Growing interest is being shown in SCL strategies, which can alter the educational paradigm of when, where, and how learning occurs, as well as who can actively participate in the learning environment. Examining students' learning experiences in self-directed learning environments is crucial given the growing popularity of SCL techniques (Lee & Branch, 2022).

Under the Ministry of Higher Education, several additional courses, including the Philosophy and Current Issues course, known as Mata Pelajaran Umum (MPU) are required in both public and private universities. General studies are part of undergraduate education programmes that aim to provide students with preparatory knowledge for living in modern society. The general knowledge in this course may include understanding noble values, philosophy, history, responsibility in society, mastery of soft skills, expansion of Malaysia-based knowledge, and being able to apply knowledge in everyday life. Students in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) need intellectual skills to enable them to play a meaningful role in society. Philosophy and Current Issues aim to provide students with certain skills, in addition to gaining exposure to various characteristics of intellectual skills. The Philosophy and Current Issues course is also a complementary course to the courses offered in student specialisation programmes (Ministry of Higher Education, 2017).

This course is known as CTU 552 in UiTM and all undergraduate students are required to sit for the CTU 552 Philosophy and Current Issues course. Students must pass this compulsory subject to graduate and receive their scroll. Current academic planning suggests that studies generally expand to include aspects of knowledge improvement, such as communication skills, appreciation of pure values and history, and exposure to the field of general knowledge, which has a wider scope that goes beyond the boundaries of traditional disciplines. This includes exposure to new fields, such as art, philosophy, and foreign languages. In principle, this is in line with the ideal towards producing broad-minded, balanced, and holistic graduates.

A set of assumptions about reality is called philosophy and has a comprehensive worldview. Understanding the nature of existence, humanity, and our place in the universe are all part of it. The foundation of knowledge is philosophy in which humans can find the truth and rely on their intellect to sustain them. Philosophy can be defined as a critical analysis of reality characterised by logical inquiry that seeks the truth in order to develop wisdom. It is generally accepted that philosophy courses can help students improve their logical thinking and argumentation abilities (Simon Iliadi et al., 2019).

2. Problem Statement

According to Jan Dejnozka (2019), philosophy is a subject that is difficult for students of other fields, such as mathematics, engineering, and art to understand. In general, every academic field, such as history, politics, economics, and sciences has its philosophy, general guiding principles, and theoretical framework (Shri Nikunja, 2015). A study conducted at a Malaysian public university also found that most students think the Philosophy and Current Issues course is a difficult subject to understand because it involves thinking (Latiff, 2020b). Therefore, UiTM students in all majors whether social sciences or technological sciences need to study the CTU 552 Philosophy and Current Issues course because it was introduced by the Ministry of Higher Education. UiTM students are required to study CTU 552 even if they are not a philosophy major. The purpose is to educate students to develop analytical and strengthening thinking. At the initial stage, many students would fail to understand the content of CTU 552 because it is quite difficult to understand. However, after a series of lectures, most students would begin to understand what is meant by philosophy (Latiff, 2020a).

However, to master this subject, students should continue to read and conduct research until they find their answer. The dominance of philosophy will help students gain a deeper understanding of their field (Jan Dejnozka, 2019). Indeed, eastern and western countries have rich intellectual traditions that relate to philosophy. The theories and philosophy of education

must be understood by all students. The theories, philosophies, and ideas that nations and societies want to advance through education have an impact on educational practices and planning throughout the world (Shri Nikunja, 2015).

Students can even learn to relate philosophy with current issues happening in the world today. The learning outcomes can open their minds and they can think critically to solve problems. Habibah @ Artini et al. (2021) examined students' understanding of the Philosophy and Current Issues course at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). Despite the implementation of online teaching, UMS students in this study understood the aspects applied in the course. However, delivering the content of this course was quite challenging, especially when explaining heavy and complicated issues.

According to Latiff (2020a), Philosophy and Current Issues is not a favourite course among students because it requires high reading and comprehension. This course is also considered difficult because it requires understanding and is more difficult if conducted online (Faezah, 2022). In that regard, this paper aimed to analyse students' acceptance of learning the CTU 552 Philosophy and Current Issues course and their ability to learn philosophical subjects. Is this subject difficult for UiTM Johor Branch students, or can they adapt to the syllabus provided?

Research Questions

- i. What are UiTM Johor Branch students' reactions to learning CTU552 Philosophy and Current Issues?
- ii. How do UiTM Johor Branch students prefer to learn CTU552 Philosophy and Current Issues?

Research Objectives

- i. To identify UiTM Johor Branch students' reactions to learning CTU552 Philosophy and Current Issues.
- ii. To explore UiTM Johor Branch students' preferences in learning CTU552 Philosophy and Current Issues.

3. Literature Review

Learning Philosophy in Higher Education Institutes

The Philosophy and Current Issues Course is a new subject introduced by the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Malaysia in 2019. This course has been developed to expose students to Western Philosophy, Islamic Philosophy, National Education philosophy, and the Pillars of the Nation. The purpose of this course is to produce critical thinking students as a preparation for them to face contemporary issues in any condition. This course has been made a compulsory subject (MPU) for all university students (Ministry of Higher Education, 2017).

Based on the CTU 552 syllabus, students are taught about the role of logic and the prevention of fallacy, which is an error in thinking. Students are also taught about deduction and induction, as well as various knowledge production methodologies and the construction of knowledge (Mahadi, 2021). In general, this course can expose students to the elements of philosophy, namely metaphysics, epistemology, logic, psychology, and ideology. Epistemological philosophy, as mentioned by Mok Soon Sang (2009), contains the principles of reality, knowledge, and value.

In the development of knowledge and intellectuals, epistemology, as one of the main branches of philosophy, plays an important role. This concept of knowledge can improve and develop the human mind. Meanwhile, logical philosophy is an art that can confirm the validity of theories and information obtained in any research. Consequently, logical philosophy has begun to gain attention in the world of education in Malaysia through the Philosophy and Current Issues course (Khalid & Mohammad Hazim, 2021).

The syllabus in this course is important for guiding and teaching students how to think logically. It can help students apply the knowledge that has been learned in completing the tasks given during lectures. They also can use knowledge and philosophical theories in daily life to come up with new ideas and solutions (Latfah et al., 2020). This course consists of nation-building ideologies with a Malaysian identity that educators should not take lightly. The development of critical abilities among students is one of the objectives of this course (Marinsah et al., 2021). Marinsah et al. (2022) also opined that this course could cultivate and strengthen moral development by helping students develop their identities and personalities to tackle problems, particularly after graduation.

Philosophy is a natural way of thinking about daily life issues that can help humans develop their talents, intelligence, capacities, and ability to understand what it truly means to be a human being. Because of this, philosophy is still a vibrant, useful field of study today. Philosophy continues to emphasise the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of numerous contemporary fields, despite being regarded as science fields. Many individuals believe that philosophy is a complex and tiresome field of study since it is the study of thoughts. A plan for a solution can then be made after analysis and truth-finding. As a result, all university graduates would develop high ideals, noble personalities, and can resolve a variety of societal problems (Mahadi, 2021).

A study on the acceptance of the Philosophy and Current Issues course was conducted by a group of lecturers from USIM in 2020. This quantitative study involved a total of 526 first-year students who had enrolled in the Philosophy and Current Issues course in the first semester of 2019/2020. The results of the study showed that thinking skills helped these students in terms of solving assignments and activities related to the course. These students can also apply logical thinking skills in other courses and their daily life.

Even though students would consider this course as a heavy course, or a debate about issues at a higher level, they are aware of its importance and expect this course to make them more rational, critical, and able to find the best answer to solve problems in their lives. This study was conducted as an initial input to energise the instructors of this course at USIM in particular and in HEIs in general, as preparation and improvement in the implementation of this course in the coming semesters. Nevertheless, students gave positive feedback on their acceptance of the course at the end of the semester (Latiff, 2020b).

Students' Reactions in Learning

Nowadays, there is a growing interest in student-centred learning (SCL) approaches, which can change the educational paradigm of when, where, and how learning takes place and who can play an active role in the learning environment. With the increasing interest in SCL approaches, it is important to examine students' learning experiences in this self-directed learning environment, as students can feel uncomfortable and unprepared for the demands associated with SCL environments (SCLEs) (Lee & Branch, 2022). In such a learning environment, teachers act as guides or facilitators that provide students with guidance to find relevant

information and useful resources. In this sense, students are viewed as active learners who take responsibility for their learning. Thus, teachers and students need to understand the concepts of SCLEs and agree with their roles in these environments (Elen et al., 2007).

Blended learning is an approach that has increasingly been adopted by universities due to its perceived effectiveness in providing timely, continuous, and flexible learning. It is often identified as a mix of teaching methods and materials that can be placed somewhere on a continuum between fully online and fully face-to-face courses (Partridge, Ponting, & McCay, 2011; Prasad et al., 2018). Gregory and Lodge (2015) found that it is not uncommon for academics to feel that technology puts the responsibility on teachers to provide all materials online. They identified the perception that traditional face-to-face methods work well and are not transferable to online teachings. This observation was confirmed by Partridge et al. (2011), who also pointed out that the reduction in face-to-face student-teacher encounters meant there was an increased need for self-motivation, good time management, and knowledge of sophisticated learning technologies.

Several negative student experiences of online learning have been recorded throughout the pandemic. These challenges include poor internet connectivity, which impedes online access and lessens students' learning capability (Hussein et al., 2020). Students' perceptions of the ill-preparedness and disengaging responses of educators amid the pivot towards online learning emerged as another factor that has affected their learning experiences (Dang et al., 2022). As a result of such perceptions, students became disinterested and unmotivated while learning remotely, which eventually affected their academic performance (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Furthermore, students have also suffered from deteriorating mental health and not coping well in terms of their health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hasan & Bao, 2020). Increased workload, perceived lack of support from educators, lack of prior experience in online learning, and reduced interactions with peers further increased stress among students.

Students' beliefs about education and learning relate to their implicit assumptions and understandings about teaching, learning, and learning environments (Lee & Branch, 2018). All students have different beliefs that lead them to the learning context, but the belief in education and learning is linked to their expectations and attitudes towards education and learning. Lee and Branch (2022) have shown that students' beliefs can influence their learning approaches, motivations, attitudes, environmental perceptions, and outcomes. They also claimed that once students have positive learning experiences and appreciate their learning environments, they can change their beliefs and be more consistent with the constructivist approach. In another study, they revealed that students' beliefs can influence their perceptions of learning environments and interactions (Lee & Branch, 2018).

Students' Preferred Methods of Learning

The use of errors as learning milestones can depend on how they are perceived within the teacher-student relationship during classroom activities. Several studies have shown that students' perceptions of teachers' reactions to behavioural and emotional errors can affect their fear of failure and the use of errors as learning opportunities (Heinze et al., 2012). Other studies have explored teachers' error-handling strategies in conveying the meaning of errors that can influence the perception of students' errors and classroom climates (Soncini et al., 2021). In terms of classroom goal structure, students' perception of the mastery structure was positively related to their reactions to errors, while their perception of the performance-avoidance structure was negatively related to arousal-motivational reactions to errors and their grades (Soncini et al., 2022).

Additionally, one of the individual differences in predicting students' interest in learning subjects and academic achievement is gender. For example, several studies have indicated that both men and women are interested in a range of fields, including mathematics and language (Ceran & Plaut, 2010; Ganas & Liuski, 2016). Since students' interest can lead to academic achievement through motivational processes, such as self-confidence and self-regulation (Lee, Lee, & Bong, 2014), teachers' instructional methods can affect students' interest and academic achievement, which may vary depending on their gender and level of previous interest. This pattern may also differ from subject to subject. Wolters (1998) found that students who were studying dull or irrelevant materials would add new elements, such as games to their assignments and more strategies to maintain emotional interest.

Self-directed learning (SDL) that is driven by intrinsic motivation enables information orientation and deeper learning in material selection. Based on SDL, while the task of "interrelating students" usually falls on their teachers, individual preferences for learning new things (simply interested in them) appear to be a key foundation for learning, which can make the entire process of learning easier for students and their teachers. A common method to increase students' interest in new materials and promote learning is gamification (Lieder et al., 2023). Meanwhile, online or combined learning, if provided well and with sufficient learning support, can reduce travel time to campuses and give students the flexibility to learn effectively from home at their own pace. For working students, it is more convenient to plan their work schedule, go to work, or even work away from home. According to Schaffner et al. (2005), game-based learning (GBL) is a clear learning-outcome game and the game design process involves the need for theme coverage and the priority of the game. Students can, therefore, develop their cognitive abilities through GBL-based learning goals (Plass et al., 2015).

In a related research, Garris et al. (2002) developed a model for GBL by describing how players learn when playing. Researchers have pointed out that GBL can enable students to develop critical thinking in learning processes because players must consider the consequences of different choices in the game process. Seong and Hwang (2013) stated that GBL is an educational method that can integrate materials and learning principles into games to attract learners to learn effectively. Accordingly, many studies have shown that GBL can be used to guide students to understand teachers' knowledge and concepts through games and teaching strategies (Hwang et al., 2015; Papastergiou, 2009; Troussas, 2020). GBL can also improve students' learning motivation, self-efficacy, participation, attitude, and experience.

Furthermore, recent research has confirmed the advantages of electronic books over printed books. Berry et al. (2010) concluded that the cost of study materials was clear evidence of the advantages of electronic resources that can impact students' choices and results. Despite the many benefits, many students feel uncomfortable when reading e-books because they get easily tired when reading onscreen. Although the use of electronic resources has many benefits, learners still prefer printed books, which can be borrowed from libraries and used by students to learn together. Several kinds of literature support reading from printed books, which is directly instrumental in enhancing students' grades, creating notes during studying, achieving objectives, and paving the way towards higher education preparation. Furthermore, students previously considered printed books and teachers to be the main sources of knowledge. Amirraj et al. (2023) have reported that when using printed materials, students' understanding, selective reading behaviour, and intentional reading were better.

4. Research Framework and Methods

The qualitative approach was used in this study on the reactions and preferences of respondents in learning philosophy and current issues, as their feelings, opinions, and ideas would have been impossible to measure with numbers. In this study, primary data were collected using questionnaires with open-ended questions that the respondents were required to answer in a Google form. According to Ballou (2008), two methods can be used to collect information using open-ended questions: the first method is self-administration which requires the respondents to self-record their answers by writing on a physical questionnaire or by entering their responses into a computer. Meanwhile, the second method is through an interview that requires respondents to answer verbally and recorded by the interviewer. This study applied the first method because it can provide quality answers from the respondents, as they were fully responsible for their answers. This method will lessen errors in transferring ideas and opinions through their responses. The format of a self-administered electronic questionnaire can also provide some assistance in reducing errors, including missing answers, incomplete responses, misunderstood terminology, and illegible writing (Ballou, 2008).

The open-ended questions were chosen for collecting data because they required the respondents to pause, think, and reflect on each question before answering. Additionally, their answers would represent their personal feelings, opinions, and ideas regarding the subject. Agustianingsih and Mahmudi (2018) stated that open-ended questions can provide researchers with more than one answer, which is unlike close-ended questions. The characteristics of these open-ended questions were important in achieving the objective of this study, which was to explore students' reactions and their preferred way of learning CTU552. Questionnaires were distributed to students who have registered for this subject for two semesters, starting from October 2022 to February 2023 and from March to July 2023. This research collected 157 answers from the students involved in this survey. Only one simple question was analysed from the questions that had been asked to the students. The question was "What did you enjoy about learning CTU552 and what did you dislike about learning CTU552?"

For the framework, this study referenced the Backward Design, by Wiggins and McTighe in their book, *Understanding by Design* (2005). Unlike other classic beginning-to-end approaches in educational frameworks where the instructor first decides what to teach before developing content, activities, and assessments for the learners, this design begins with the desired end goals by focusing on what the learners will learn, rather than what the teacher will teach. In this sense, the Backward Design is a student-centred approach. There are three main stages in the Backward Design process for designing instructions: i) identify the desired results, ii) determine the acceptable evidence, and iii) plan learning experiences and instructions. This educational design process may also include several actions: writing students' learning goals and learning outcomes, creating assessments that measure progress toward outcomes, and designing activities that will prepare learners to perform well on the assessments. Thus, a course that is developed using the Backward Design practices alignment between learning goals, class activities, and class assessments (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

To extend the Backward Design, this study has also referenced the course design developed by Fink (2013), namely the Integrated Course Design. This framework is considered as an extended version of the Backward Design (2005). The Integrated Course Design is illustrated in Figure 1.

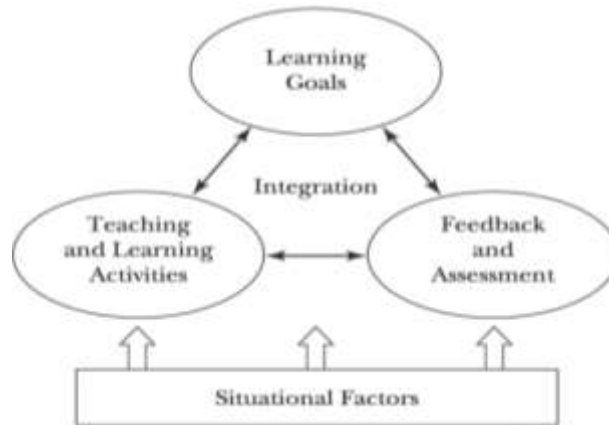


Figure 1: Key Components of the Integrated Course Design
 Source: Fink (2013)

By understanding the principles in both frameworks, this current study has focused on identifying the best methods for delivering and assessing students on the Philosophy and Current Issues course (CTU552) by exploring their reactions and their preferred way of learning this subject. This process was in line with the SCL principle in the Backward Design (2005) and the Integrated Course Design (2013). Thus, the research design for this current study is illustrated in Figure 2.

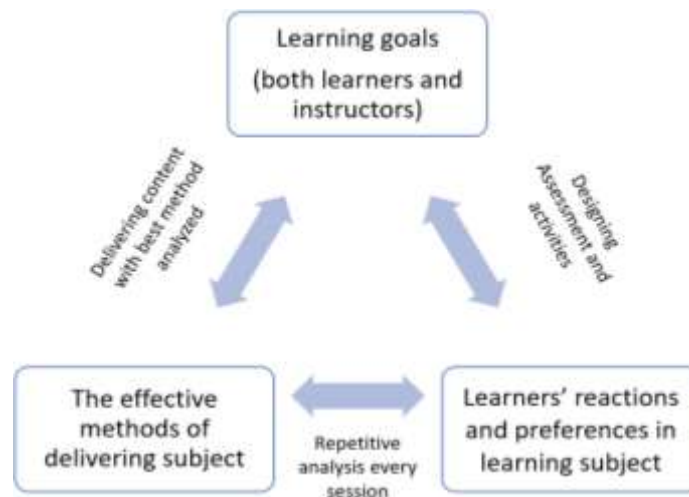


Figure 2: Elements in the current research design
 Source: Authors' illustration

The collected data were analysed using the Atlas.ti software, with a coding approach. There are four basic approaches for analysing open-ended survey responses (Lahmer, 2022; Tim Gell, 2019). These approaches are as follows: i) code responses into buckets, ii) share the full list, iii) input the text into a word cloud, and iv) use text analytics, as shown in Figure 3.

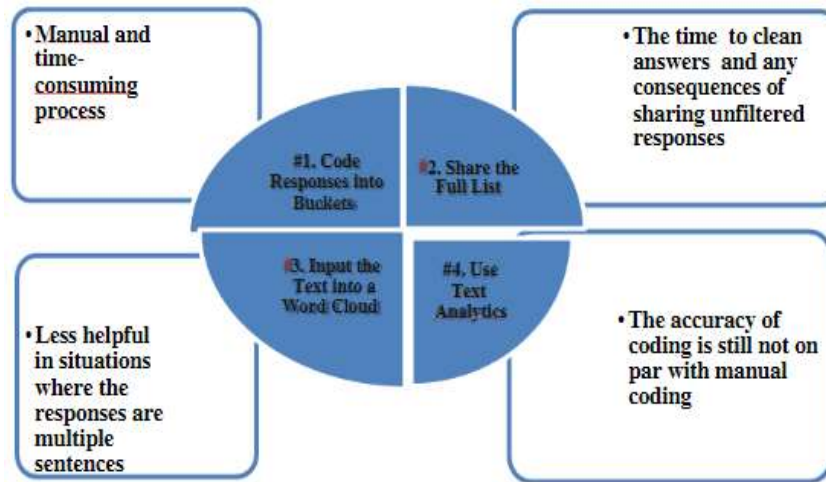


Figure 3: Approaches for Analysing Open-Ended Survey Responses
 Source: Tim Gell (2019)

After considering the principles of each approach, as shown in the figure, this study applies the bucket coding approach, with the assistance of the Atlas.ti software. The second approach of sharing the full list was not chosen for this study because it would have shown unfiltered responses from the students that could contain various types of answers, including symbols, typos, and emoticons. The third approach was also unsuitable because the students' reactions were presented in multiple sentences. This study has also avoided using tools to auto-analyse the data because this approach would be less accurate compared to manually coding in the responses. Thus, the responses have been manually coded and presented in an illustration, with the assistance of Atlas.ti.

By expanding the analysis using the coding method, this study has also applied thematic analysis, as it is considered to be the best approach in dealing with meaning recognition and interpretation. This method of analysis can be used within different frameworks to answer different types of research questions (Jnanathapaswi, 2021). Thematic analysis was highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2006) as occurring within the following six phases: i) familiarising with the data, ii) generating initial codes, iii) searching for themes, iv) reviewing potential themes, v) defining and naming themes, and vi) producing the report. Additionally, the common errors in identifying themes are divided by the questions asked to the participants, not by the contents of their answers (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Hence, this study has identified themes across the content of what the respondents answered, not according to the questions they have been asked.

5. Discussion

Qualitative analysis was applied to 157 surveys involving only one open-ended question. This study has identified and classified 190 citations into 22 codes. Figure 4 shows the themes of each code based on the keywords that are mentioned by the respondents. A semantic network has been constructed based on the classification of these seven themes, as defined as follows: (i) Instructor's personality; (ii) Good environment; (iii) Method of delivery; (iv) New knowledge; (v) Uniqueness of Philosophy subjects; (vi) Life practices; and (vii) Challenges within this course (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Semantic network of students' reactions and preferences in learning CTU552
 Source: Authors' analysis

Figure 4 shows that most respondents enjoyed their learning sessions for the Philosophy and Current Issues course (CTU552). Only six answers showed the challenges faced by the students in learning this subject, in one respondent found this subject to be difficult, two of them disliked the test for this subject, and three of them thought this subject was confusing. Nonetheless, all respondents have also stated that besides the difficulty and their confusion, they found that this subject was enjoyable to learn.

Compared to the other themes, the method of delivery was repeatedly mentioned by the respondents, specifically 44 times, with 32 respondents mentioning that the delivery method was simple and understandable, 9 times they mentioned about attractive activities, including quizzes and games, and 3 respondents mentioned about additional materials, such as attractive slides. These responses showed that they were satisfied with the way their instructor delivered the content and assessments. According to Gopinathan et al. (2022), curriculum enhancement, gamifying process, and thinking process have a positive impact on innovative methods of delivery.

The positive reactions from the respondents can also be related to life practices (27 times mentioned), the instructor's personality (25 times mentioned), new knowledge (25 times mentioned), the uniqueness of the philosophy subject (22 times mentioned), and good environment (19 times mentioned). In summary, the respondents found that they can relate this subject to their own life, which has provided them with ideas, solutions, and experiences regarding the implementation of the course content in their daily life while embedding positive values and enriching religious aspects. They also found that the instructor's personality, such as being professional, inspiring, and practising good values has made this subject interesting, as they were guided in finishing assessments and being motivated to learn. Yukir (2023)

similarly reported that lecturers' personality can influence students' achievement in the learning process.

The analysed data showed that the respondents were attracted to this subject because they learned new knowledge and current issues. The uniqueness of this subject was also among the criteria that led to positive reactions among respondents, as they discovered new concepts in philosophy, new ideologies, and new terms. They also found that topics in this subject were interesting and made them knowledgeable. The least reactions in learning this subject, but not the least in importance were a good learning environment, including happy surroundings, stress-free atmosphere, fun, and enjoyable learning sessions. A stress-free environment is crucial to ensure effective learning among students (Elsalem et al., 2020).

6. Conclusion

The Philosophy and Current Issues course, known as CTU552 in UiTM, is a compulsory subject for all students from every field of study in higher education institutions in Malaysia. Several studies found this subject as not a favourite among students since many of them opined that this subject is difficult and requires a lot of effort in thinking and reading. In contrast, the results of this study showed satisfaction in learning CTU552 based on the reactions of the students at the UiTM Johor Branch. Among the reasons for these positive responses were the attractive methods of delivery practised by their instructors, the instructor's personality, the good environment, and how this subject may be implemented and practised in their daily life. The respondents also found that this subject has provided them with new knowledge. Even though they faced certain challenges in learning this subject, whereby certain respondents found that it was difficult and confusing, most respondents were attracted to the uniqueness of philosophy that can be applied to explain current issues. Another finding showed that the respondents preferred a fun and stress-free method of learning, in addition to simple and understandable explanations about the topics in the subject. They also preferred to learn with the inclusion of quizzes, games, and additional attractive materials, such as interesting slides and videos. In conclusion, it is important to highlight these aspects to ensure effective future learning sessions.

Acknowledgements

This research acknowledges the Geran Bestari (G-BEST) Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Johor, G-BEST Fasa 1/2022 that sponsors this publication.

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