

A Cross-Cultural Thematic Analysis of the ‘First-Day Teaching Pedagogy’ of Business Studies Discipline in Higher Education

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Abstract—Teaching strategies and learning environment are key components in higher education. Academic staff (professors) are drivers in ensuring that students have an engaging learning experience. This study aims to explore professors' perspectives on first-day teaching pedagogies and their importance and relevance. The research focuses on region and nationality-specific aspects, demographic influences, and the professor's teaching experiences in selecting pedagogical approaches and engaging students. A qualitative methodology was selected, and 61 professors were interviewed across various countries and universities, therefore providing a cross-cultural perspective to this study. Thematic analysis provided insight into the diverse nature of first-day teaching and answered the ‘what and why’ questions regarding the pedagogies used. This study is unique in that it provides a macro- and micro-level mapping, demonstrating the layered and complex nature of first-day teaching approaches and the need to understand that an ecosystem of pedagogies exists to enhance student engagement.

Keywords—Innovative Pedagogy, Active Learning, Higher Education, Student Engagement

ICTIEE Track—Innovative Pedagogies and Active Learning
ICTIEE Sub-Track—Inquiry-Based Learning in Fostering Curiosity and Critical Thinking among Gen Z

I. INTRODUCTION

LEARNING, the process of acquiring knowledge and skills is not static; it is dynamic. Situational and contextual factors influence learning, and cultural differences and perceptions of learning can profoundly shape what students learn and how they learn. Various teaching strategies adopted on the first day of class have impacted the class environment, student morale, and grades (Wilson & Wilson, 2007). Further research has also demonstrated that students who have been exposed to an effective icebreaker report greater course satisfaction than those who have not (Anderson et al., 2011). Another study found that students who had a positive experience on the first day had positive perceptions of the professor (Wilson & Wilson, 2007). Given these observations, the professor's teaching pedagogy adopted on the first day leaves a clear and profound impression on students' performance and success. Clement (2007) states that instructors should ensure that the first day of a course is

successful, as the impressions formed on that day have a long-term impact on students' performance throughout the semester.

For students to be successful, it is important to deliver a classroom experience that is encouraging from the very first day. This becomes even more vital when instructing students from another country (De Vita, 2000). The classroom needs to be perceived as a conducive learning environment. According to Jones' (2010) research, icebreakers foster peer relationships, which have been highly beneficial for international students by providing them with opportunities to develop intercultural awareness. The ability of newly enrolling students to adapt to unfamiliar learning is particularly challenging for international students, which might affect their retention and academic performance (Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Thomas & Heath, 2014).

Various studies have been conducted to validate the significance of first-day teaching pedagogies and their impact on student improvement, course satisfaction, professor perception, and the likelihood of retention. To date, most studies have focused on the first day of the course, primarily through student surveys. One of the researchers states that even the instructor's tone on the first day has a lasting impact on the student. Despite its potential impact, there is a lack of research on how professors or instructors format their first day of class. The literature also fails to reflect the context of Middle Eastern and Asian countries. There are also only a few comparative studies available. Most of the research reflects the perspective of the global North rather than the global South. Another observation is that the influence of demographic variables on the choice of first-day teaching strategies has not been significantly explored. This gap necessitates a comprehensive examination of the teaching strategies professors use on the first day across countries.

Our research aims to explore this gap and present a comparative analysis of universities across various countries. This research will contribute to the body of knowledge, enhancing student learning experiences and performance during the semester. The study spanned a year, during which we collected data using open-ended surveys and individual interviews with 61 participants across various business modules of the business studies program, including both numerical and

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theoretical modules offered at universities across different countries. The programs were attended by both local and international students at universities in these countries. This study aims to contribute to existing literature by providing a comparative cross-cultural analysis of the first-day teaching pedagogies adopted by professors in business studies in the higher education sector. This study seeks to address the following questions:

- What are the innovative practices most commonly used by business professors on the first day?
- How do first-day teaching strategies differ across countries, cultural contexts, and student cohorts?
- Do demographic factors (nationality, years of experience, and class environment) influence the selection of the teaching pedagogy?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first day of a university class is significant because it establishes the foundational relationship between the student and the professor, one that will endure. It is also a critical point for establishing the module/course dynamics and, more importantly, setting expectations in higher education.

Several foundational frameworks influence instructional design in higher education. According to Wiggins & Mctigh, (2005), there are three stages to curriculum planning: identify goals, determine evidence, and plan learning experiences. This can help improve instructional design. This approach encourages educators to clarify expectations and leverage the first class to ascertain subsequent teaching approaches. Biggs (1996) affirms that student achievement and engagement improve when there is purpose to every aspect of instruction. He further states that aligning teaching, learning activities, and assessments is essential to foster coherence in module delivery. The Analyze, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (ADDIE) model is a cyclical instructional design framework. It provides a road map for curriculum evaluation and course delivery. This model encourages planning that focuses on content and pedagogy (Molenda, 2003). The Community of Inquiry framework proposes three intersections. They claim that there is a connection between cognition, social, and teaching. On the first day, pedagogy is shaped by professors' ability to cultivate these three aspects in the classroom through innovative pedagogy and to build a conducive learning environment for students (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

The research by Arjomandi et al. (2021) compares the engagement of first-year and senior business students using various in-class active teaching strategies. The study's findings reinforce that diverse teaching strategies are more effective for international and new students. The research by Lance et al. (2021) focuses on professors' behavior on the first day of teaching in 23 STEM courses. The findings reveal that the instructor's structure and behavior affect student satisfaction, motivation, and learning outcomes. Another empirical study analyzes that during the first day of the module, the time spent

on introduction and course policies affects both student and instructor satisfaction (Meyers & Smith, 2011).

Objective 1: To compare the first-day teaching pedagogies across different countries

Another thread of literature that invokes curiosity is the association between the professor's years of teaching experience and the choice of first-day teaching pedagogies. Most of the literature concentrates on the impact of the first day on student anxiety and expectations. Some literature also suggests that the professor's tone influences students' perceptions of the professor and the module (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006, p. 28). However, there is only limited quantitative and qualitative evidence that years of teaching experience directly shape first-day pedagogical choices, particularly in the context of business education. Hence, the second objective is conceptualized.

Objective 2: To examine the relationship between the professors' teaching experiences and their choice of first-day pedagogy

Extensive research exists on students' perceptions of first-day strategies (Lang, 2008; Clement, 2007). The studies examine how students are motivated or dissatisfied (Wilson & Wilson, 2007). Some researchers like Perlman & McCann (1999), Henslee et al. (2006), and Wilson & Wilson (2007) mention that on the first day of class, many instructors may like only to review the curriculum in a friendly manner and not take any icebreakers, introductions, or teach any course concept, but would let the class out early. On the contrary, advice from faculty developers recommends using icebreakers and teaching some course content, or at least having a meaningful discussion of the course objectives (Nilson, 2003; McGlynn, 2001; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006; Lang, 2008; Davis, 2009). Most studies concentrate on what we should do, rather than why it is being done.

Objective 3: To analyze the influence of demographic factors on first-day teaching pedagogies

The study by Shima (2024) examines the application of innovative approaches, including role-play. Social interactions and the use of technology encourage language acquisition and engagement. The shift in student-centered learning has ignited interest in innovative first-day teaching pedagogies. Flipped classrooms, group-based activities, and icebreakers improve the class environment. According to Bain's research (2024), some of the best college faculty members prioritize the course's purpose. They include the 'hows' and 'whys' of the module on the first day. The study by Colbert et al. (2017) found statistically significant positive correlations between active learning strategies and classroom engagement. These strategies support knowledge retention, deepen student understanding, and create opportunities for collaborative, self-directed learning. However, extensive literature and comparative analysis are not available, and hence, the fourth objective is framed.

Objective 4: To identify and categorize the pedagogy strategies adopted by professors during the first day of class

The studies cited in the literature review demonstrate that first-day pedagogy influences student engagement, perceptions, and long-term academic success and performance. Nevertheless, a significant gap remains in understanding, documenting, and categorizing the pedagogies actually employed by academic faculty members in business management programs across diverse cultural contexts. Empirical comparisons of variations in approaches due to faculty demographics or classroom composition are limited. By addressing this crucial gap, the study presents a comprehensive thematic analysis of first-day pedagogical practices, thereby offering meaningful insights for higher education institutions, educators, policymakers, and researchers to create effective and inclusive teaching environments.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research adopted an interpretivist philosophy, aiming to understand the professors' teaching pedagogy and classroom experiences in business management within the higher educational context. This method ensures that the research can capture the context-sensitive nature of qualitative data. The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, supported by written responses from participants who were unable to complete the interview in person or online. For further analysis, descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, and thematic analysis were utilized. The study was cross-sectional, designed to capture the academic staff's perspectives, perceptions, and pedagogical practices during the specified one-year research period. The participants included 61 professors from various universities in higher education business management programs. (n=61) were selected through a non-probability purposive sampling strategy to obtain a broader range of variation in nationality, academic rank, institution type, and years of teaching experience. Academic staff were eligible if they had at least 1 year of higher education teaching experience and were actively teaching during the study year. The sampling approach was selected to maximize data diversity for evaluating early teaching pedagogy. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using a customized protocol. The interview questions were designed and developed based on an extensive review of the literature on first-day pedagogy, with close consultation with co-researchers and subject matter experts. They were framed to align with the study objectives, ensuring that contextual influences and teaching practices were captured. The interview questions were pilot tested with four academic staff to ensure relevance and clarity, and minor adjustments were made. The questions were framed to elicit narrative responses that could be analyzed through thematic analysis. The semi-structured interview key questions were:

1. Have you experimented with any icebreakers, games, or other innovative pedagogy? If so, have you found them engaging, and which one has been most effective?
2. How has your teaching experience influenced and shaped your first-day pedagogy? Can you narrate some classroom examples?

3. Which university are you teaching at, and how do your institutional policies and methodology influence your pedagogy?
4. What is your nationality? Have you observed any influence your nationality has had on your first day of teaching pedagogy?
5. Discuss the demographics of your students (i.e., International, Local, etc.). Do these factors influence your first practices? Do you adjust your first day practices based on these factors?

All participants provided informed consent, and they were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and academic use only. Each interview lasted for approximately 35-40 minutes. Each session was then transcribed, resulting in one A4 page per participant. Written responses were then subjected to a thematic analysis structure. 55 face-to-face or virtual semi-structured interviews were conducted, along with six written interview responses.

The researchers ensured cross-cultural sensitivity and the validity of the dataset. In addition to the interviews, researchers also obtained written reflections on the same core questions. The written responses reinforce the interview findings and strengthen the dataset with additional classroom illustrations. To maintain transparency and consistency, both the interview transcripts and the written responses were quoted within the same thematic framework. The coding approach was similar to that adopted in the interview transcript, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. This approach ensured reliability and uniformity throughout the thematic analysis. Return responses, along with the interviews, provided an opportunity for detailed explanation and triangulation of perspectives during the coding process. We refine the course through extensive discussions to identify and recognize culturally sensitive expressions and practices. All the academic staff were employed in English-medium instruction at universities, so there was no need for translation. To further validate and strengthen our comparative claims, key interpretations were reviewed by culture experts and adjusted as necessary. Reflexivity and peer debriefing sessions were held to challenge and refine interpretations across cultures.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Descriptive Analysis

TABLE I
DETAILS OF THE SURVEYED SAMPLE PARTICIPANTS
(PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION)

	Male	Female		
Gender	31	29		
Student Classroom Composition	Local	International	Mixed	
Nationality of surveyed academic staff	30	23	8	Others
Years of Experience	Indian	British	Omani	Others
	27	12	12	10
	1-10 years	11-20 years	21+ years	
	25	21	15	

Duration of Class (minutes)	60 minutes	90 minutes	120 minutes	
Frequency	15	30	16	
Teaching Course Content on the First Day	Yes	No		
Discuss Course Outline, Marking Scheme, Assessment Details, Frequency	13	48		
Frequency of usage of icebreakers	Yes	No		
Use of AI Technology on First Day	33	28		
Discussion on Ethics and Integrity associated with AI	Yes	No		
Academic Rank of the surveyed Academic staff	Professor	Associate	Assistant	Lecturer
Frequency	10	12	25	14

According to Table I, the sample represents a relatively equal mix of men and women, with 31 male and 29 female professors. Though the percentage of men is slightly higher than that of women, the sample reflects a balanced gender diversity. Across the sample classroom, 30% of students are local, 23% are international, and only 8% of classrooms are mixed. This indicates the presence of strong, homogeneous classrooms, either local or international, rather than a heterogeneous mix across higher education institutions. The professors represent various nationalities, with Indians (27%) having the highest participation, followed by those from the United Kingdom (12%). Similarly, the Omani professors are also (12%), with the remaining 10% representing a mix of various other nationalities. Most professors in the sample have extensive experience; only 15% have 1-10% work experience. Universities have affiliations with international universities. From a sample of 61 university academic staff, it is observed that they teach across programs with universities from the Middle East, Asia, North America, Europe, the UK, and a few from the Oceanic region. Among the 61 academic staff, 10 were professors, 12 were associate professors, 25 were assistant professors, and 14 were lecturers. Worldwide, universities have

professors who teach classes for 90 minutes (30%), 120 minutes (16%), and 60 minutes (15%).

Regardless of variations in various demographic variables, 48% of professors do not discuss the course content in their first class of the semester. Only 13% discussed the course content during their first class. Most participants (nearly 59%) discuss the course outline, content, marking scheme, and assessment details, while only 2% of the sample do not. 33% of participants use an icebreaker, while 28% do not use any during the first class of the semester. There is a mixed response to the use of artificial intelligence on the first day of the session. 31% of the professors do not use artificial intelligence (AI), whereas 30% confirm using some form of AI during the first-class session. 45% of participants discuss issues related to the use, integrity, and ethical concerns of artificial intelligence. In contrast, only 16% of the participants do not discuss the ethics and integrity associated with artificial intelligence.

B. Cross Tabulation Analysis

According to Table I, professors primarily discuss the course outline, assessments, and marking scheme on the first day (95%). It is observed that British and Indian professors use more ice-breakers relatively, but there is some variability (63-75%). The analysis reveals that discussions about the ethics and integrity of AI are more prevalent among British and Indian professors. It is worth noting that the use of artificial intelligence remains relatively low overall (<50%), with the highest observed in the UK faculty. The table reveals that starting to teach the course content is the least common across all the groups, with Omani professors displaying a slightly higher likelihood than others (33%). The findings demonstrate a significant difference in teaching pedagogies across nationalities.

Table II shows that, across all universities, professors discuss the course outline and assessment details (100%). This suggests that a widespread norm exists in higher education management classrooms worldwide. From the table above, it is observed that Asia is the outlier, with 70% of the faculty starting their course content immediately, which is higher than the Middle East (18%) and the UK/Europe (12%). The findings suggest that a more content-driven pedagogical culture may prevail on the first day in Asian management education. European (76%) and Asian (72%) universities use more icebreakers than those in the Middle East (41%), indicating that they prioritize and promote interactive engagement and relationship-building from the start of the semester. It is noted that the Middle East lags, with less than half of the participants using icebreakers, formal classroom traditions, or differing views on initial student-teacher dynamics. The table shows that discussions on ethics and AI integrity are very high in the UK/Europe (88%) and Asia (72%), but lower in the Middle East (59%). These statistics reveal a strong institutional norm and awareness that the recent policy and curricular reforms could have shaped. Regarding the use of AI on the first day, the analysis reveals that, again, the UK/Europe (52%), the Middle East (29%), and Asia (28%) are less likely to introduce AI on the first day of class. This finding indicates regional differences in first-day teaching pedagogies and in the integration of AI technology across various business schools worldwide.

Table III reveals that professors with more than 10 years of experience are more likely to begin the course content slightly earlier on the first day. The usage of icebreakers tends to increase with experience. A similar pattern was observed in discussions on the ethics and integrity of AI usage. The analysis shows that the use of AI technology increases with experience, but remains below 50%. The findings in this table reveal that the professor's years of experience influence the adoption of first-day teaching pedagogy.

Table IV shows that there is no difference in classrooms with a student composition of local (27%) and international (26%) students. However, with a mixed population (12%), the rate is much lower, indicating that professors tend to delay the launch of teaching directly into the content when facing a more diverse or mixed student population. The use of icebreakers is similar across all student compositions: mixed (63%), international (61%), and local (57%). This suggests that consistent engagement with students is achieved, with a slight increase in the use of icebreakers when the student composition is mixed internationally. Discussion of ethics and AI integrity is higher in mixed groups (75%), followed by local groups (67%), with international groups showing the lowest (52%). This reflects a stronger emphasis on ethical concerns in more diverse classrooms, which may stem from challenges in managing varied cultural expectations. The analysis reveals that the highest reported use of AI on the first day is among the mixed group (50%), followed by the local (37%) and international group (30%). These findings suggest that professors adapt their teaching pedagogy and strategies to accommodate diverse student compositions.

C. Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted of 61 semi-structured interview transcripts from business management professors from various nationalities and university affiliations. Thematic analysis is a commonly used approach in qualitative research, as it considers that participants' perceptions and recollections contribute to the value of the investigation and analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The researchers diligently verified that the extracts aligned with the study objectives at all coding stages. The themes identified were explicitly defined. The interviewer made no subjective inferences or interpretations beyond the statements. However, interpretations were used to identify patterns in the dataset, establish their significance and relevance, and organize and summarize the data. Braun & Clark's (2006) thematic analysis method is the most widely used within the qualitative literature. The researchers have followed the six-step approach of Braun & Clark (2006).

Step 1: Familiarization

The dataset comprises 61 interviews with business management professors from diverse higher education institutions across countries, focusing on first-day teaching pedagogies. It was subjected to Braun & Clarke's (2006) structured thematic analysis. The interviews were rich in details on student engagement techniques, pedagogical innovations, classroom environments, approach to assessment, perspectives on artificial intelligence, and technology. The dataset reflected wide variations but also showed strong commonalities. In the first step of the thematic analysis, the researchers converted the

interview notes into Microsoft Word. The researchers recorded each participant's information in a separate Word document. Demographic details for all participants were recorded and stored. To get familiar with the data set, the researchers posed a few questions:

1. What are the key insights the participant aims to share?
2. What are the main factors that seem to be expressed?
3. What are the similarities and dissimilarities in the data set?
4. How does the participant narrate?

The first step of familiarization aims to enable researchers to initiate the identification process.

Step 2: Coding

The thematic analysis coding involved no pre-existing code. The researchers developed a descriptive coding schedule. This step aims to reduce the data set and partially identify initial designs. The coding for this research was conducted manually by all three researchers. Each researcher read and coded the data separately. After the initial coding, the researchers held several meetings to discuss the observations and resolve coding discrepancies through a consensus process, ensuring the codes accurately reflected the data. Coding was performed physically using a printout of transcripts and colored markers. Qualitative data analysis software was not used. Regular cross-checking of codes and reflective discussions ensured the trustworthiness of the coding decisions. The subsequently emerging theme was reviewed and collaboratively refined to ensure alignment with the research aims. The codes were developed iteratively from initial ratings. Inter-coder reliability was calculated for each code by comparing coding sheets. The percentage agreement ranged from 88% to 98% across eight principal codes (Table II). Some of the codes were combined, while others were merged, clustered, or redefined. Each theme was checked for data coherence and internal consistency before final naming and reporting.

TABLE II
INTERCODER RELIABILITY FOR CODES

Code	Coded Segments	Agreement	Disagreement	Agreement %
Interactive engagement	60	58	3	96
Assessment discussion	70	69	4	98
Innovative pedagogy	32	30	3	93
Games/ Icebreakers	58	55	3	94
Integrity/Ethics	33	31	2	93
Classroom diversity	55	53	1	96
Real-world scenarios	25	22	4	88
Module outline /description	61	58	3	95
Rapid content coverage	18	16	2	88

The coding is not word-for-word, but an analysis of participants' perspectives and affirmations of teaching pedagogy. In this stage, meaningful passages are identified from the text to create an explanatory code that is linked to the research questions and objectives (innovative teaching

pedagogy, assessment, teaching, artificial intelligence, and academic integrity). The identified codes facilitate comparisons and highlight similarities from the participant's perspective. Recurring codes include icebreakers/games, student introductions, outlining course structure/assessment, emphasis on expectations, use of real-world examples, cases, and industry anecdotes, group work/activity, technology/AI integration, ethics/academic integrity discussion, formal vs. informal start, adaptation for student diversity/mixed cohorts, professor's prior experience as an influencing approach, and the professor's nationality as an influencing approach.

Step 3: Searching for Themes

The third step of thematic analysis involves exploring patterns of themes. The coded passages are probed to identify and categorize the themes. The researchers found different perspectives in the narrative of the first-day-of-class teaching pedagogy. The researchers identified various pedagogical perspectives related to assessment, teaching, academic integrity, the use of icebreakers, and other games. This process is repeated until enough categories are identified to articulate a theme.

Table VI aims to shed light on the prevalence of key themes in the dataset and their implications. The strong presence of icebreakers reveals that student engagement takes priority when deciding on the first-day teaching pedagogy. The fact that the course outline and assessment are discussed on the first day across the data is almost universal, which indicates that professors are transparent with their students. It is observed that not all practice innovative pedagogy; only half of the sample does, indicating a growing trend towards active learning.

TABLE III
PROFESSOR NATIONALITY X FIRST DAY PRACTICED TEACHING PEDAGOGY

Indian	5 / 30 (17%)	29 / 30 (97%)	19 / 30 (63%)	21 / 30 (70%)	8 / 30 (27%)
British	0 / 12 (0%)	12 / 12 (100%)	9 / 12 (75%)	11 / 12 (92%)	6 / 12 (50%)
Omani	3 / 9 (33%)	9 / 9 (100%)	4 / 9 (44%)	6 / 9 (67%)	3 / 9 (33%)
Sri Lankan	0 / 3 (0%)	3 / 3 (100%)	2 / 3 (67%)	0 / 3 (0%)	1 / 3 (33%)
Others	1 / 7 (14%)	7 / 7 (100%)	4 / 7 (57%)	4 / 7 (57%)	1 / 7 (14%)
Others	1 / 7 (14%)	7 / 7 (100%)	4 / 7 (57%)	4 / 7 (57%)	1 / 7 (14%)

TABLE IV
UNIVERSITY AFFILIATION X FIRST DAY PRACTICED TEACHING PEDAGOGY

University Affiliation	Start Teaching Content (Yes)	Discuss Course Outline	Icebreaker Use	Ethics & AI Integrity Discussed	AI Tech Use
Middle East	3 / 17 (18%)	17 / 17 (100%)	7 / 17 (41%)	10 / 17 (59%)	5 / 17 (29%)
UK/Europe	3 / 25 (12%)	25 / 25 (100%)	19 / 25 (76%)	22 / 25 (88%)	13 / 25 (52%)

Asia	9 / 18 (50%)	18 / 18 (100%)	13 / 18 (72%)	13 / 18 (72%)	5 / 18 (28%)
Oceania	0 / 1 (0%)	1 / 1 (100%)	0 / 1 (0%)	0 / 1 (0%)	0 / 1 (0%)

TABLE V
PROFESSOR'S TEACHING EXPERIENCE X FIRST DAY PRACTICED TEACHING PEDAGOGY

Experience	Start Teaching Content (Yes)	Icebreaker Use (Yes)	Ethics & AI Integrity Discussed (Yes)	AI Tech Use (Yes)
1-10 years	4 / 25 (16%)	15 / 25 (60%)	14 / 25 (56%)	8 / 25 (32%)
11-20 years	7 / 21 (33%)	13 / 21 (62%)	16 / 21 (76%)	9 / 21 (43%)
21+ years	4 / 11 (36%)	8 / 11 (73%)	8 / 11 (73%)	5 / 11 (45%)

TABLE VI
STUDENT COMPOSITION & THE FIRST DAY OF PRACTICED TEACHING PEDAGOGY

Student Composition	Start Teaching Content (Yes)	Icebreaker Use (Yes)	Ethics & AI Integrity Discussed (Yes)	Use AI Tech (Yes)
Local	8 / 30 (27%)	17 / 30 (57%)	20 / 30 (67%)	11 / 30 (37%)
International	6 / 23 (26%)	14 / 23 (61%)	12 / 23 (52%)	7 / 23 (30%)
Mixed	1 / 8 (12%)	5 / 8 (63%)	6 / 8 (75%)	4 / 8 (50%)

Table VII describes the term frequency analysis, revealing the overall trend, the concepts, and the methods most frequently discussed and of general importance across the entire sample. Higher Term Frequency (TF) indicates that a term is widespread in the given dataset. The terms 'assessment' (TF=210) and 'icebreakers' (TF=126) are commonly discussed in the first-day class strategy. In contrast, the terms 'integrity' (TF=23) and 'classroom activities' (TF=67) have lower TF values, which may indicate that they are niche practices or less universal concerns.

TABLE VII
KEY THEME INSIGHTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Theme	Prevalence	Key implications
Icebreakers/Interactive Activities	Most common	Student comfort and engagement take priority
Course Outline/Assessment Discussion	Nearly universal	Transparency is core to first-day sessions
Innovative Pedagogy/Tech Integration	About 50%	The sector is evolving toward active learning

TABLE VIII
TERM FREQUENCY (TF) INTERPRETATIONS

Term	Frequency of occurrence
Icebreaker	126
Assessment	210
Integrity	23
Classroom Activities	67

Table VIII shows that the IDF identifies specific or unique practices observed in the dataset. ‘Mentimeter’ (IDF=2.56), ‘Gamified’ (IDF=2.36), and ‘Plagiarism’ (IDF=2.15) are more distinctive, appearing in only a handful of interviews, likely representing innovative or special practices adopted by specific professors. Whereas ‘Icebreaker’ (IDF=0.21) and ‘Assessment’ (IDF=0.03) are universal, present in nearly every interview. These represent baseline practices discussed by almost all professors.

Table IX highlights terms that are both commonly occurring (i.e., having a high TF value) and especially distinctive (i.e., having a high IDF value), thereby helping identify thematically important words across the entire qualitative data set. The table analysis reveals that Mentimeter (TF-IDF: 64.00), although mentioned in only a subset of interviews, is both prominent and distinctive when it appears, identifying professors innovating with digital polling. Terms like Engagement, Activities, Group Activity, and Tech/AI (TF-IDF range: ~37–59). These represent central and moderately distinctive themes—active learning and the integration of technology are recurring and

especially notable when they occur. Integrity and Plagiarism (TF-IDF: 37.4 and 21.5) values indicate that these terms are mentioned less frequently but are highly distinctive when they do arise, highlighting a focused concern with academic ethics in certain interviews. Icebreaker (TF-IDF: 26.46). This term is frequently used, albeit with lower distinctiveness, suggesting that icebreakers are a baseline practice familiar to and widely recognized by many. Assessment (TF-IDF: 6.30) is prevalent across nearly all interviews, but it is universal that it is less distinctive.

TABLE IX
COMBINED TERM FREQUENCY-INVERSE DOCUMENT FREQUENCY (TF-IDF) INTERPRETATIONS

Term	TF	IDF	TF-IDF
Mentimeter	25	2.56	64.00
Engagement	54	1.10	59.40
Activities	67	0.76	50.92
Group activity	45	0.84	37.80
Tech/AI	30	1.25	37.50
Integrity	20	1.87	37.40
Icebreaker	126	0.21	26.46
Case study	15	1.70	25.50
Plagiarism	10	2.15	21.50
Assessment	210	0.03	6.30
Integrity	20	1.87	37.40

TABLE X
MAJOR/ MINOR THEME FREQUENCIES

Theme	Frequency (n=61)	Example Quote
Icebreakers/interactive engagement	53	"I frequently use icebreakers and/or interactive activities as they relax the students and help them to connect".
Course outline/assessment explained	61	"I always start the first class by sharing the outline of the module, the marking scheme, and the assessment for the semester."
Tech/tools (polls, games, online)	33	"I use short polls through Mentimeter and educational games to engage my students from the start."
Real-world/industry examples	25	"I bring in news, examples from practice, or invite guest speakers even on the first day."
Adapted to cohort diversity	29	"With international students, I focus more on universal activities that everyone can relate to."
Rapid content coverage	16	"After a brief introduction, I start teaching core concepts

TABLE XI
INVERSE DOCUMENT FREQUENCY (IDF) INTERPRETATIONS

Terms	Interview documents	IDF Value
Mentimeter	5	2.56
Icebreaker	53	0.21
Plagiarism	7	2.15
Assessment	62	0.03
Gamified	6	2.36
Syllabus	20	1.16
Group activity	28	0.84
Integrity	11	1.87
Tech/AI	17	1.25

Academic integrity/AI and discussion	18	since students expect this immediately." "Given the advances in AI and plagiarism risks, I stress ethics and integrity from day one."
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TABLE XII
FREQUENCY OF THEME/SUB THEME

Theme/Sub-Theme	Number of Interviews (n=61)
Icebreakers	53
Outlining assessments/rules	60
Innovative pedagogy/tools	33
Real-world/practical linkage	25
Icebreakers	53
Formal content on day one	16
Classroom diversity adaptation	29
Academic integrity/ethics	18

Table XII reveals the frequency of occurrence of the themes and sub-themes across the interview scripts. Almost all professors discuss the course outline and assessments (60/61) on the first day of teaching pedagogy. Moreover, it is also evident that most professors do not start teaching the formal content (16/61) on the first day.

TABLE XIII
THEME CO-OCCURRENCE

Theme 1	Theme 2	Co-occurrence
Icebreakers	Technology use	24
Assessment	Academic ethics	15
Classroom diversity	Icebreakers	22
Engagement	Real-world	18
Icebreakers	Technology use	24

Source: Developed by authors

The theme co-occurrence table illustrates the frequency with which two themes co-occur in the same interview. Higher co-occurrence suggests a strong linkage, indicating that when professors use one method, they are likely to use or be open to the other. Lower numbers show that the practices are more independent. According to Table XIII, engagement and the real world are more independent practices. This table helps identify the bundling and clustering of teaching strategies.

TABLE XIV
THEMATIC FIRST-DAY PEDAGOGY MATRIX

Practice Category	Examples	Cross-Cultural Variation
Rapport Building	Introductions, icebreakers, group games	More common in Western contexts
Course Expectation	Syllabus review, assessment policy	Universal
Innovative Pedagogy	Polls, gamification, debate	More frequently with greater experience, tech-savvy professors
Early Content Delivery	Core concept introduction, problem sets	More in Asia, Oceanic
Assessment/Integrity	Ethics, AI discussion, plagiarism policy	Increasingly common everywhere

Source: Developed by authors

According to Table XIV, the thematic matrix compares the distribution of teaching strategies across contexts and professional profiles. The matrix provides a comparative overview of the first-day teaching strategies. It can be described as a thematic guide that enables educators and researchers to gauge the diversity, evolution, and contextual adaptation of first-day management pedagogy.

Step 4: Reviewing the themes

After analyzing the occurrence of terms and their degree of distinctiveness, the possible themes are identified and described. During this explanatory stage, more analytic work was required. Initially, more categories were developed to ensure that the themes could be constructed. At this stage, further analysis was conducted to assess deviations, similarities, dissimilarities, distinctiveness, and arguments associated with the themes. The researchers developed thematic maps that feature the evolving categories and themes (Figures 12 and 13). This stage was an iterative process that included re-reading and revisiting the themes and codes.

Step 5: Defining and Naming the Themes

After analyzing the 61 interview scripts, the thematic maps were refined and finalized. After that, each theme was defined and narrated. Any overlapping and reparative themes were identified. Further, the data extracts presented in the report were selected to illustrate key features of the central theme and to form a narrative of the first-day pedagogy adopted by professors in the higher education context.

Step 6: Producing the report

In the final step, a clear, logical, and concise description of the findings is written. The report comprises note-taking, coding, and theme labeling. Thus, the thematic analysis conducted used both narrative and the presentation of data extracts. Key themes were written in the context of research questions and objectives.

A synthesized explanation of the identified themes, derived from the thematic analysis of interview scripts, is provided below.

Theme 1: Universal pedagogy

An analysis of the transcripts reveals that specific teaching approaches are consistently employed by academic staff, regardless of demographic differences in context, country, culture, institutional settings, and background. Many academic staff allocate a specific time in the first class to discuss the module framework, contents, chapters, and assessment criteria. One participant stated, "I talk about the course outline and brief them about the assessment plan." Another participant stated, "I discuss the lesson plan, future class schedules, class protocol, rules, and regulations. One of the participants explicitly stated that "I believe that first-day pedagogy was intended to provide a detailed explanation of the module outline, assessment mode, and criteria, as well as to clear up any doubts the students might have about the assessment." Similarly, another participant also stated, "I present the modules, the learning outcomes, assessments, and delivery mode to my learners across all the modules I teach."

Theme 2: contextual variations

The thematic analysis of the scripts and the descriptive analysis revealed many variations in first-day teaching across the regions analyzed. Middle Eastern professors prefer informal communication and contact with their students before actual teaching begins. They generally engage in talk to understand one another. One participant stated, "I do not follow the same approach for all my modules, as I teach some with international students while my other cohorts have more homogeneous groups, so I adjust my first-day teaching pedagogy based on the composition of the students." Another participant stated, "I take my class for 1 hour and 15 minutes as specified by her university." Another participant stated, "I change my approach not only based on the diversity but also on the class size, as I have more interactions with smaller cohorts as compared to larger classrooms, the personal interaction is reduced, and I go for activity." A key insight is that the institutional context significantly influences pedagogical outcomes. Some professors prefer a discussion-based pedagogy over a fixed curriculum. The transcripts reveal the professor's nationality, university affiliation, academic stream, and student composition, thereby deviating from the standard pedagogy. First-day teaching pedagogy is personalized, flexible, and culturally sensitive.

Theme 3: student engagement

Most professors believe that student engagement is necessary to capture students' attention. This attention and involvement will lead to the acquisition and retention of knowledge. The researchers did not observe or find substantial evidence to support the notion that all or most professors use the same pedagogy to engage students. However, all the professors have explicitly stated that student engagement is the foundation of their teaching pedagogy. One participant stated, "I do not discuss the assessment as our university has it published on the website. I achieve student engagement through examples, references, YouTube videos, and interactive tools like

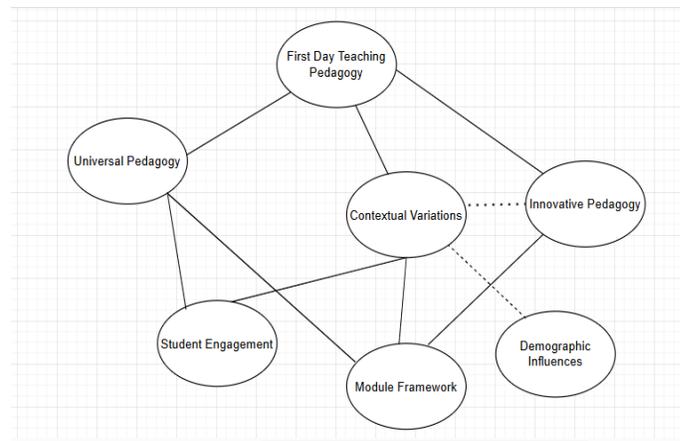
Socratic.” Similarly, another participant stated, “I do not teach at all on the first day; I discuss and establish a relationship with the students. Another professor stated, “I only discuss through real-time scenarios and life-work experiences.” One participant had an interesting approach: “I introduce the modules through games and role play, and I find it very engaging.” The macro-level thematic map depicted in Figure 12 illustrates the core themes of first-day teaching approaches, showing a close association among various principles and contextual and demographic factors, presenting a comprehensive, interconnected model for understanding the nuanced first-day teaching pedagogy in the higher education context.

Theme 4: innovative pedagogy

The approach to innovative pedagogy varies and is based on individual professors' perspectives. A detailed analysis of the transcripts revealed simple, unique pedagogical approaches and subtle variations in how the module's first day is conducted. One participant stated, “I share my own experience related to the module to make the class more interesting and engaging.” Another participant stated, “I make the students play games based on the module to engage them. For instance, in my strategy module, the students play a business word game.” Similarly, one participant stated, “They adopt an informal approach to connect with the students and engage in open discussions with the students on aspects directly and indirectly related to the module.” One of the participants stated, “I do not teach, and engage the students with role play, games, and leadership activities as that builds a strong connection with the students.” Only a few of the participants stated that they engage students with digital games and other technologies.

Theme 5: Demographic influences

The participants' interviews reveal variations across demographic factors, including nationality, years of teaching experience, university affiliation, and student class composition. There were variations in the interviews of professors from various nationalities. One Middle Eastern participant stated, “I discuss the terminology associated with my module, and I do not use any icebreakers to engage the students.” Another Middle Eastern participant stated, “I do a simple question and answer session to test their previous knowledge, and I do not teach during the first few classes.” A British participant stated, “I discuss the college rules and regulations. I also discuss student expectations, and I discuss my own personal experiences.” Two Asian participants even show videos and discuss their experiences to give a practical perspective to their learners.” One of the European participants has a unique approach, he stated, “for his first day class, he discusses the module, assessment, and then invites a key corporate head to interact and engage with the learners.” Most Western professors focus on introductions, group games, and icebreakers, whereas Asian professors tend to focus on the module's core concepts. Some professors tend to discuss ethics and integrity when the class includes both local and international students.



Source: Developed by Authors

Fig. 1. Macro Level Thematic Map for First-day teaching pedagogy

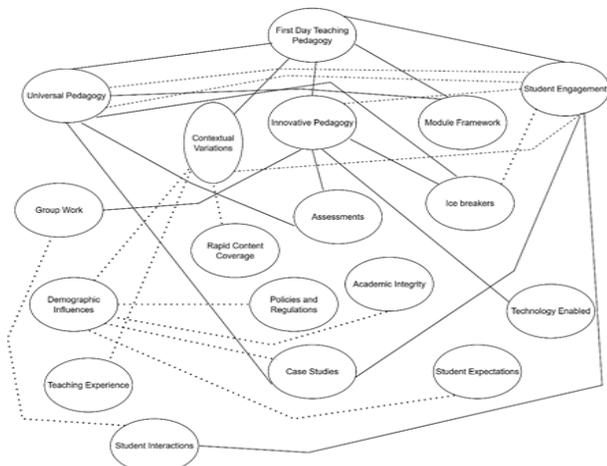
Theme 6: Module /course Framework

On the first day, students are eager to learn about the modules and their details. This perception was strong among the professors in the dataset, and almost all ensured that the module details were shared with the students. One participant explicitly stated, “Students ask many questions related to the assessment on the first day, so I discuss the module outline and the assessment in detail, though I will discuss it later on also.” Another participant also stated, “I discuss the module outline in detail and brief the students on the depth and scope of the module.” Similarly, one participant stated, “I briefly discussed the module outline and assessment.” Figure 13 presents the micro-level thematic map, depicting the complex, nuanced, and layered interplay of multidimensional factors influencing first-day teaching pedagogy in higher education. At the center of the figure is the key aspect “First Day Teaching Pedagogy,” which then branches into core domain themes, including universal and innovative pedagogy, student engagement, module framework, and contextual variation. The dotted lines indicate an indirect, less influential, and modifying capability. The solid lines represent the strength of the relationship between the variables in the study. The distinction between dotted and solid lines separates the foundational drivers from the contextual modifiers within the broader pedagogical ecosystem.

V. DISCUSSION

The study explored and provided insight into first-day teaching pedagogy, with a particular focus on professors' (academic faculty) perspectives. This area remains underdeveloped compared to studies from students' perspectives. Fundamental questions about first-day teaching strategies and innovative practices were explored to determine their relevance and significance to the session and, to some extent, student engagement. The findings of this research enhance the existing pedagogical literature by aligning the empirical findings of the thematic analysis with foundational instructional design frameworks. The research further places attention on the role of professors' nationalities, student cohort demographic factors, and how these are being ‘played out’ in these first-day teaching sessions. Furthermore, as a cross-regional study, it emphasizes regional similarities and differences, thereby addressing the lack of cross-cultural studies in this field. The methodologies

chosen aimed to capture the context-sensitive nature of the qualitative research. Through the thematic analysis, the findings not only showcase the themes that have been drawn out but also provide insight into the layered perceptions, offering a deeper comprehension of the approaches that need to be understood.



Source: Developed by Authors

Fig. 2. Micro Level Thematic Map of First-day Teaching Pedagogy

Strategies and innovative practices

Strategies and practices are key in teaching and learning and have a cascading impact on the module's outcomes and student motivation (Wilson & Wilson, 2007). Previous studies have highlighted the impact of the first day of teaching on student experience (Clement, 2007). This study has demonstrated that professors also pay particular attention to first-day delivery, ensuring that students have transparency and are made aware of the requirements and expectations.

The study found a strong emphasis on icebreaker strategies and their appropriateness for the first day of teaching. This strategy allows multi-functionality (Jones, 2010; Korobova & Starobin, 2015), and indeed this was very evident: the creation of an interactive environment (Gazar, 2023), nurturing environment (He, 2021), relationship building, trust building, inclusivity, and enhancing student participation, helping them to connect, and providing an environment that is relaxing.

The number of teaching years' experience is also prominent in the study, whereby for those professors with 21+ year demonstrate the usage of more material coverage in class (starting the content the content icebreakers, Ethics, AI), this is not surprising as years of experience lead to better class management strategies emphasizing more control, structure and adaption of approaches (Unal & Unal, 2012)

Regionality and Nationality

Country-specific education systems and educators' nationalities can significantly impact teaching and the delivery of materials. Professors' behavior affects students' impressions and experiences (Lance et al., 2021). The study found both similarities and differences. Early content delivery (core concepts) was found among those professors from Asia and Oceania in the study. A third of Omani professors began teaching on the first day. This aligns to education systems in some parts of Asia that are frequently influenced by Confucian traditions whereby course material is delivered immediately,

allowing structured learning and a strong foundation to knowledge build (He, 2021), however, with Indian professors only at 17% in this category, it raises questions of the shifting of first day strategies as previously found in Asian countries. The study found that no British professors taught the content on the first day. Western education strategies tend to focus on student-centered teaching methods, including inquiry, discussion, questioning, and dialogue. This approach has been effective in delaying content on the first day, thereby allowing for more interactive dialogue. The study suggests that a content-heavy first-day session may demotivate students. The Majority of the professors scored 100% in their discussion of the course outline. This aligns closely with students' expectations on the first day of previous studies (Lang, 2008). Placing the icebreaker strategy (key to student engagement) in a regional context shows that the/UK has a higher percentage. Again, this aligns with previous studies and policy, such as the QAA, which highlights student engagement as a crucial component of quality assurance (QAA, 2025).

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology was less prominent on the first day, with British nationals showing a 50% increase, while others lagged. Despite AI being available for some time, recent developments in 2022 by OpenAI have had a significant impact, especially on students. However, the low adoption among professors in this study may suggest concerns about understanding the types of technologies to use and the support and training required around them (Lee et al., 2024). The British nationality professors' adoption may be due to adherence to policy.

Regional variations were also evident among professors from the Middle East, as many engaged with students before the first day of teaching. This would be achieved through meetings or informal chats to understand the student composition and thereby determine the best approach. This demonstrated the adaptability and flexibility of professors and suggested that they tailor their teaching approach on the first day (Bass, 2019). The findings highlighted that there was little differentiation between local and international student cohort approaches; however, the qualitative narratives did provide individual perspectives. Professors tended to adjust their approaches to the cohort.

Macro-level and micro-level mapping

In reflecting on research questions and objectives of the study (teaching strategies across different countries, examining the relationship between professors' teaching experiences and choice of first day pedagogy, and analyzing the influence of demographics factors on first day teaching pedagogies), it was necessary not just to provide an overview but to delve deeper into understanding the layered perspectives, nuances and influencing factors. Macro- and micro-level maps were developed from analyses of term occurrences and their distinctiveness, yielding additional categories that led to in-depth findings (Figures 12 and 13).

Macro-level identified six themes in terms of teaching approaches for the first day: universal pedagogy, contextual variations, student engagement, innovative pedagogy, demographic influences, and module/course framework. Universal pedagogical principles (course outline and assessment) were consistent and unaffected by differences in context, region, culture, or demographics; however, individual

professors tailor their approaches in different ways. This aligns with first-day teaching practices as a common practice to provide a structure and guidance for the module. Contextual variations were evident across regions, with first-day teaching personalized, flexible, and culturally sensitive. This aspect highlighted the importance of diversity and inclusivity being evident. The study found no evidence showing that the professors adopted the same approach for student engagement. The approaches were evident in various strategies, such as icebreakers, which took many forms and served diverse purposes.

The micro-level mapping depicts the complexity and layered interplay of multiple factors that influence first-day teaching. It is important to understand that, despite the curriculum schedule for commencing teaching, the day is a series of academic, physical, and emotional components, and that maintaining balance is achieved through strategies in motion in accordance with student engagement. The micro-level mapping highlights the multidimensional factors that comprise the pedagogical ecosystem. It should be noted that the first day of teaching pedagogy is not a 'one size fits all' approach but an intricate balance of factors. Yes, there are universal approaches used by all professors to deliver information of utmost importance. This includes 'course outlines (module framework) and assessments, and students will engage as a default due to their significance to the student. However, academic integrity, policies, and regulations, as well as considering students' expectations, are all part of this. The professor remains key in this ecosystem as they are the drivers of the approaches. What the study has strongly highlighted is the individuality of the professor in adapting their approaches and strategies to the cohort, aligning the strategies that best serve students and their purpose while remaining within the boundaries of the curriculum.

D. Theoretical foundations and theme alignment

The universal pedagogy demonstrates that discussing the assessment criteria and module framework aligns with Wiggins & McTighe's (2005) research, which outlines three stages in which professors can focus on outcomes before content and instruction. This reflects a backward design for planning first-day pedagogy in line with the learning outcomes. The study's conclusions show that teaching strategies and assessments align with the institution's program specializations and with governmental or private institutional types. These findings support Biggs's (1996) research, which states that intentional alignment of instruction and evaluation is essential. Biggs's (1996) study provides more evidence in favor of the concept of demographic variation. The study findings demonstrate constructive alignment, showing that classroom pedagogy varies depending on staff expertise and whether students are local or foreign.

E. Implications for Higher Education

The study proposes actionable implications for curriculum design, faculty development, and policy framework in higher education. Training can be provided to academic faculty to recognize the diversity and demographics of the classroom and develop adaptive practices that include innovative pedagogy.

Engagement strategies, such as activities and games, must be adopted to maximize student acclimatization to the environment and active participation from the outset. When developing a curriculum framework, module introductions can be innovatively crafted to align with the institutional context and cohort characteristics. Higher educational institutions can design policies to provide guidelines for responsive first-day pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

Teaching strategies and learning environments are among the key foundations of academia, having a profound impact on student experience and performance. This study is unique in that it explores professors' perspectives on the first day of teaching, as this initial day connects professors to students and shapes the learning environment. The approaches and strategies for delivering materials can have a lasting impact on learning trajectories and student engagement. Therefore, this research addresses the 'whats' and 'Whys' of the approaches adopted by the professors, as well as the reasoning behind their choices. The research addresses teaching strategies and innovative practices, regional aspects, national contributors, and student engagement. The uniqueness of this study is presented through the lens of macro- and micro-level mapping, showcasing layered perspectives and the associations and interconnections among variables, thereby offering a deeper understanding of the complexity of first-day teaching strategies. However, the research findings are cross-sectional, capturing first-day pedagogies at a single point in time rather than being longitudinal and reflecting instructional changes over time. Future research could investigate the relationship between first-day pedagogy and student learning or engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed that most professors lacked innovative pedagogical approaches to technology. As generations of students become more tech-savvy, it is recommended that professors are trained in and incorporate technology/tools to engage students. The study highlighted low levels of AI delivery among professors. It is recommended that, as the evolution of AI is progressing rapidly, professors be supported in this endeavor, with training being embedded as essential. Considering the low attention span of Gen Z and upcoming generations, the study recommends greater use of AI in teaching, continuous assessment, and feedback to improve student engagement. The focus on these interactive teaching tools should be outlined in the first class itself to set the right tone and garner student interest.

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