

Learner's Learning Experiences & Difficulties towards (ESL) among UKM Undergraduates

Nooreiny Maarof (Corresponding author)

Faculty of Education, TESL department, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 46300 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Indira Malani A/P Munusamy

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 46300 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

E-mail: indiraukm@gmail.com

Doi:10.7575/aiac.all.v.6n.3p.83

Received: 11/01/2014

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.6n.3p.83>

Accepted: 19/03/2015

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the learners learning experiences and difficulties of ESL among the UKM undergraduates. This study will be focusing on identifying the factors behind Malaysian undergraduate's experiences and also their difficulties in the English as Second Language (ESL) classroom. This paper discusses some of the issues of English language learning experiences at the tertiary level in this country. It reflects on how the teaching of English is variously conceptualized in our classrooms, raising important questions about the positions of English literacy to Malaysian undergraduates. A qualitative research method was employed, whereby a semi-structured interview session was conducted comprising thirty Bachelor of Arts undergraduates (BA ELS). The findings of this study suggests learners at tertiary level do face challenges in their ESL classroom learning, in areas such as the learning environment itself needs to be improved, the quality of education, the academics, the role of educators and the teaching approach were among others pointed out by the learners themselves.

Keywords: English language teaching, English as Second language (ESL), learner's experiences, learner's difficulties, language learners

1. Introduction

The experience and challenges of education in the tertiary level can be sometimes overwhelming for some students. This is especially for Malaysian students who couldn't cope with their other peers in terms of communicating and also socializing in English which is considered as a norm. In Malaysia, English is considered as a Second Language (L2), whereby most of students acquire the language via classroom learning and teaching in schools. In general the English language is taught as a second language in all Malaysian schools which is also a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary schools. The English language is also considered as the world's language in which is widely spoken around the world, contributes to the learning and use of English to gain information in science and technology (Melor Md Yunus et.al 2013). The importance of English literacy and competence among graduates is considered pivotal as it enable the graduates to further succeed in the career path and also able to access information around the world. However, recently, there has been an alarming concern over the standard of English proficiency among Malaysian students that is worrisome (Saadiyah & Kaladevi, 2009).

Previous researches on students' initial experience of higher learning have identified many complex factors encountered by students in their transition from learning at school to learning at the university. For example, issues concerning the academic over compliance, rigidity in learning styles and dependence on routines and teachers (Wankowski 1991), subject difficulty (Beard and Hartley 1984), lack of motivation and unorganized study skills, lack of academic and intellectual competence (Upcraft et al, 1990), and 'excessive and overwhelming' workload (Chambers 1992, Meyer 1991) have been mentioned as factors contributing toward academic failure for tertiary education learners.

At Malaysian tertiary institutions in general, it is observed that many learners do not possess the basic word knowledge necessary for successful tertiary education (Kaur 2007). Some Malaysian educationists have expressed similar concerns. A study done by Farida (1995) affirms that most Malaysian students were not independent enough while Sarjit and Salasiah (1996) added that students would usually expect to be "spoon-fed" with information and notes, which they would 'memorize to death'. Similarly, a study by Ellis (1996) points out that many Malaysian students at tertiary level are unsuccessful in their studies due to lack of effective study skills and habits that include reading, writing, and time and stress management skills. Also Mashkuri (1995) concedes that due to their lack of proficiency in the English language, the students are better at memorizing facts rather than applying the principles that they have learned. Other studies by Ahmad Mazli Muhammad (2007), Radha M. K. Nambiar (2007) and Zaira Abu Hassan Shaari (2008), also confirm that Malaysian tertiary learners have limited vocabulary knowledge and face difficulty in comprehending long sentences with difficult words.

A study by Kaur & Abdul Manan (2008) affirms that this change as stemming from the "continued demands from students, university administrators and policy makers for access to a greater share of the population to meet the needs of new economies that require trained and qualified employees in today's increasingly globalised workplaces". This is

crucial and imminent in producing quality Malaysian graduates. As supported by Mahathir (1991), the acquisition of English language is one of the most important issues in future workplace as the employers prefer employees who could communicate well, adapt through creative thinking and problem-solving skills using the international language. English is essential for employment opportunities, despite having English as a second language at those fields, the intensity of use of the language and the level of proficiency is still below the target (Mohd Bakri, 2003). Therefore, comprehensive steps must be taken so that the Malaysian learners at the tertiary level could learn and practice the language better in order to compete internationally and steadily.

1.1 Research Questions

The present study intends to explore these issues further to identify the learner's experiences and also their difficulties of ESL classroom learning at the tertiary level of education in Malaysia, relatively to provide insights for the following research questions.

1. What are the difficulties faced by learners in the Learning of Second language (L2)
2. How do the learners solve their L2 learning difficulties

2. Methodology

In this research study, a qualitative research methodology was employed to enhance the collection data from the student's level of experience and challenges as told by the learners themselves. The instrument used for this research is a set of interview questions to address the students learning experience and also the difficulties faced by them in the ESL classroom in the University level. In this research, the qualitative method was employed whereby data was gathered from the learner's perspective and based on qualitative analysis of interview data.

This study incorporates phenomenographic approach which is a type of qualitative research that focuses on the subjective experience of the individual. It focuses on variations or differences on how people understand or experience aspects of their world (Marton 1981). In this study, the researcher relied on the method of 'individual in-depth interview' to collect data.

2.1 Sampling

The students who constitute the sample population in this study were thirty Bachelor of Arts students, majoring in English Language Studies (ELS) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). These students have completed two semesters of ELS courses, which included proficiency courses on academic skills of speaking, reading and writing, as well as introductory courses on content areas such as linguistics, literature and English language studies (ESL). The selection of sample for this study was based on 'purposeful sampling', which according to Patton (1990) lies in "selecting information-rich cases from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance of the study in depth" (p.52).

A total number of thirty Bachelor of Arts, English Language Studies (B.A ELS) graduates combining from year 2 and year 3 undergraduates participated in the short interview session. The interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 23, and represented multiple races and ethnicity. From the total number of the participants, 23 were female (77%) representing a mean age of 22.3 years and 7 were Male (23%) with a mean age of 22.7 years respectively. The numbers of male undergraduates were outnumbered by the Female undergraduates due to the high increase in the number of Female students in the tertiary education of Malaysia, creating an unbalance gender distribution. Respondents in this study were from a diverse people of ethnicity which represent the multiculturalism in Malaysia, with 56.7 percent identifying as Malays, followed by Indians (20%), Chinese (13.3%), and Others (10%). A majority of them were in their second year, a total number of 20 (66.7%) followed by those in their third year (final year) a total number of 10 respondents (33.3%).

Table 1. Data distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentages
Female	23	77%
Male	7	23%
Total	30	100%

3. Data Analysis

To ensure a 'subjective view' of the matter, the researcher uses the 'general interview guide approach', also known as the semi-structured interview. All interview sessions were tape-recorded, transcribed for thematic analysis and checked for accuracy by a second individual. The data were collected and further analysis was conducted in analyzing the emerging themes or patterns that seem dominant among the learners respond to the questions employed.

From the data analysis, the researcher found that most of the learners agree that they face difficulties in the ESL classroom setting. The major challenge the face, based on their interview session is the classroom learning itself whereby it is too lecture oriented and the lecturers often depend on the power point presentation making it a very dull experience in learning. In terms of the teaching perspective, there were two themes extracted namely teaching concept and teaching method. In terms of the teaching concept, respondents have the perspective that lecturers were sources of knowledge and they served to transfer the knowledge to the students. The second perspective, in turn, is related to the teaching method whereby the lecturers need to use their experiences, knowledge also creativity in their teaching. The integration of both themes has formed the primary perspective which is the lecturer-centered teaching. Below are the selected interviews excerpts (to give an overview from the findings) from the respondents who participated in this study, mostly of which described the learning environment in the classroom was not efficient and dull.

(*P1-Participant 1, P2- Participant 2, P3-Participant 3)

The challenges I face is sometimes I think the lectures are too dependent on the learning materials such as the power point slides. Sometimes I feel the class is too lecture oriented and language like myself are not given flexibility to learn the language in a creative way. Its way too paradox and the learning method is always conventional. Thus it's difficult for us sometimes to really grasp the language learning and also the content naturally. Although I understand the content of the teaching being presented, sometimes I feel the learning is too rigid and it remains me of how we use to learn English during school days. (P1)

From the findings, the learner (P1) voiced about the natural language setting for them to acquire the language at its best. Also the learner describe on the classroom learning experience was similar to what she had experience during school days as the lecturers were too dependent on the materials such as the power point slides. The learner has also pointed out that the classroom learning was lecture oriented thus the learning was rigid. Lecturer-centered teaching approach like lectures is the most popular approach as compared to other approaches in higher education (Rohaila et al 2005, Bligh 1998). Despite this, several flaws have been reported to be synonymous with the lecturer-centered approach. This approach is said to entail the transfer of knowledge only from the curriculum and accepted by the students without much fuss (Wallace 1995).

When it comes to the ESL classroom learning, most often I feel like the educators lacked in terms of materials which we are given is sometimes doesn't motivate me to learn the language..The reading materials that are sometimes boring for me to read.. I think sometimes the lectures here are okay, but it would be much better if they incorporated a more fun learning environment for the students.. Not only that, I think being a language undergraduate we should include communicative learning in classroom teaching so that the learning is both ways and not a one way thing you know.. (P2)

In my point of view, I think sometimes the ESL classroom here lacks communicative learning whereby as learners we don't use the language much during class. After all as a English Language Studies learner myself I think the teaching approach should be improvised for the better.. I mean when you look at the western culture, you will see their teaching approach in University levels allows students to voice out their opinion freely and not only that it's more fun.. (P3)

Other emerging challenges that were pointed out by some of the learners were that the ESL classroom was too passive and less fun learning for them, whereby some BA ELS undergraduates most of them felt that the classroom learning and teaching could be improvised in making it a fun and communicative learning as stated by (P2) and (P3). In relevance to this, a study done by Fauziah and Jamaluddin (2009) also mentioned that teachers' passion for the subject, which is naturally articulated and expressed through their motivating methodologies and creative approaches, has the power to influence the students' interest to learn better.

Based on the overall findings to answer the first research question of the study, the data mainly suggest that the challenges faced by the learners is the classroom environment itself, the teaching approach employed by the educators, and also lack of communicative learning approach to improve their language learning in a natural setting and break free from the passive learning they were used to in higher education back in school. From the interview session, it is also found that many have voiced on the lecturers role and how it affects the classroom learning experience. This can be explained by a study done by Krashen's Input Hypothesis that teacher's language instruction should be full of rich input (both in spoken and written language) that is roughly tuned at the appropriate level for the learners in the class to provide meaningful language learning experience (Krashen, 1981).

The second research question in the study aims to address on how the learners cope when faced with difficulties of learning the English as Second Language (ESL) in classroom. The researcher employed items of questions in which to reflect upon the learners in terms of solving their L2 difficulties and also to provide suggestion whereby they think the classroom teaching and learning should be improvised. Below was some of the interview excerpts gathered from the learners;

(*P1-Participant 1, P2- Participant 2, P3-Participant 3)

I usually do a lot of reading by myself; I try my best to read some English text online or newspapers to help me in terms of learning new words.. umm.. I like reading novels most of the time since I was a teenager, so I think it's of the reason I consider myself good in English, and also its one of the reason I took English Studies as my major for degree. As for improving the classroom learning and experience, I would like to see more spontaneous learning to improve the communicative skills among the learners.. I mean I know based on the statics we could say that our Malaysian graduates lack communicative skills in tertiary education.. and I believe the educators should employ a more laid back learning so that the learners like me can be not afraid to communicate English.. Because if I'm being honest, I may be a good reader and perhaps average in writing but when it comes to communicate with English.. Im still scared to talk in English, especially with new people that I meet or in public places (P1)

From the excerpt above (P1-participant 1) explains that he enjoys reading, which was cultivated since he was a teenager and in a way it has helped him with his English language ability. Although (P1) considers himself good in terms of mastering the English language, he still is concerned to converse in English specially when he meets new people or in public spaces. He later adds that for the teaching and learning in classroom to take place efficiently, there needs to be more spontaneity to improve the communication skills among the Malaysian undergraduates to enable them converse and speak the language confidently among peers and colleagues.

I speak English at home, and I grew up in a family that most of the time we speak English.. most of the time rojak la cause the Malaysian multi ethnicity factor.. so in a way it contributes us to use Manglish.. I think that growing up being able to speak English language at home with family members and close friends has in a way improved my confidence when I need to present in from of the class or do public speaking. It has definitely provided a good foundation for L2 speakers like myself. Not only that, I think the fact that I like watching the "English" movies, drama and also listening to the English songs helps me in a way to improve what I lack in classroom learning and teaching. The lecturers in UKM are good, but I think they can be better by incorporating fun elements in class so that the learners would participate more. (P2)

In the following excerpt, (P2-Participant 2) explained that how the environment and also her interests in watching the western movies have in way helped her in learning the language more naturally. The learner indicates that at home she grew up speaking the English language at home with her family and this in a way provided as a platform for the learner to practice speaking and using the language. In addition to this, the learner has expressed her views on the current teaching and learning at the tertiary level in which according to her should incorporate fun elements to enable active learning among undergraduates. The statements from the learners also provide details in which they thought the classroom was lacking spontaneity and also the fun learning environment. A study by Duff (2001) concludes that for language learners to be successful went beyond linguistic and history knowledge to include factors such as familiarity with popular culture, confidence, and the ability to participate in "quick-paced, highly intertextual interactions". This provides strong indication that the tertiary education in Malaysia still lacks the culture of critical thinking and creative learning approach for the learners.

I cope by having conversation with my friends and course mates... it helps me to practice the language more naturally... and I am not afraid to make mistakes in pronunciation in certain words, of if my structure of words is a bit "broken", cause I feel more comfortable talking with my friends and also family members. Well, I think the classroom learning lacks two way learning, as always its more passive when it comes to learning and teaching, and maybe we should change that. I like watching English movies also I read a lot of magazines and most of them are in English, so in a way I think it helps my language skills and proficiency... umm... but when I speak with my course mates usually its more to broken English (laughing) maybe it's because its more casual in context and laid back... for lectures in class I think the educators can improvise in terms of the teaching materials and adapt more to creativity thinking... (P3)

In the above excerpt, (P3-participant 3) states that he practices speaking English language with his friends and also classmates in which it helps him to acquire the language more naturally within his comfort zone. Although he denotes that he has trouble conversing in English with his friends, he is not afraid to make mistakes. This suggests that the learner has positive attitudes towards mastering the language although faced by difficulties, good attitude in learning English is important as it shows that the learners are intrinsically motivated to learn. Dornyei and Csizer (1998) state that the rate and success of second language attainment is influenced greatly by learners' second language motivation. Without it, learning a second language might lead to ineffective grasp of the target language. The learner furthers explains that the current classroom lectures should improvise on the teaching materials and adapt to a more creative thinking. He believes that the current classroom scenario in tertiary education is that it still lacks active learning of both the educator and also the learner.

Others have also voiced out their concerns on the passive learning in the Malaysian classroom learning, which seems to be the same in what they are learning in University from how they used to learn in high school. Some have suggested using a more creative approach and also cooperating a fun learning to the ESL classroom in general. In a related research by (Brown 2007, Seda et al. 1999) found that teaching techniques are important as they are designed to foster active processing of content are recommended; these include the use of guiding questions and brainstorming among learners.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study suggests learners at tertiary level do face challenges in their ESL classroom learning, in areas such as the learning environment itself needs to be improved, the quality of education, the academics, the role of educators and the teaching approach were among others pointed out by the learners themselves. This study was also able to explore on the various issues concerning the classroom learning quality at the tertiary level that needed to be improvised. Some of the emerging issues were the lack of active learning, critical and creative thinking skills, also most of the learners voiced their concern on the lack of using the English language during classroom, whereby they were not able to practice communicating in English. Students are not motivated to learn when teachers resort to traditional methods of teaching (Sternberg & Williams, 2002). So, the educators need to vary their teaching methods in order to cater to the needs of the students. Also some of the respondents have suggested on using different teaching approaches apart from using the PowerPoint, and incorporating new teaching materials and aids in classroom. Educators now need to be versatile in their teaching strategies, and incorporate new learning methods and materials.

From this study, the researcher also found that some of the ESL learners although faced by challenges in terms of classroom learning they find solutions by doing reading in their own time, practicing by speaking English with their family and friends, watching movies and listening to English songs for them to improve their L2 language acquisition. It shows that their determination and also their attitudes towards leaning the ESL is positive overall. More importantly, this study has revealed that students with positive attitudes will have a better level of motivation, thus will be more successful compared to those with negative attitudes and no motivation. Therefore, as attitude is regarded as one of the

key factors that contribute to second language learning achievement, both positive attitude and motivation need to coexist together in order to achieve a successful language learning experience (Spolsky, 1989).

The finding of this study has also shown that the lecturers at tertiary education still lack the skills in controlling the class and creative teaching methods. The lack of this aspect needs to be overcome due to the fact that the effectiveness of classroom control is crucial to the effectiveness of the teaching. Other than that, lecturer-centered approach seems to fail in training students to master language learning skills, thinking skills, problem-solving skills and communication skills (Bligh 1998, Gabbin 2002). Although the data is derived from a very small group of students and is not applicable to the entire population of learners at Malaysian tertiary institutions, it nevertheless corresponds with the language learning experiences and difficulties faced by Malaysian tertiary learners. Therefore, it is hoped this study will provide some insights about how students go about language learning at the tertiary level.

4.1 Recommendations

There is also room for further research in this area of study; that is to understand what our university classroom are lacking and also how teachers and educators can arrive at a full understanding of the relationships among language, content, teaching, and context, and how they can implement that knowledge in their disciplinary fields. Also there is a need to study on the importance of producing quality graduates who are able to master the English language, especially among the Malaysian tertiary institutions as they are our future leaders. Research in the future could shed light on the issues concerning the challenges faced by tertiary undergraduates in mastering the ESL on a greater scale, and should provide more concrete data. Finally, future research may investigate how to assist teachers, administrators, to provide some solutions to above mentions challenges faced by the learners in the Malaysian context. The problems faced by the English Language Learners not simply as a problem to be dealt with or ignored.

Reference

- Brown, C. L. (2007). Strategies for making social studies texts more comprehensible for English-language learners. *The Social Studies*, 98(6), 185–188.
- Brown, C. L., & Bentley, M. (2004). ELLs: Children left behind in science class. *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, 8(3), 152–158
- Bligh D. What's the Use of Lectures?. third ed. Exeter: Intellect Books; 1998.
- Darus, S., & Subramaniam, K. (2009). Error Analysis of the Written English Essay of Secondary School Students in Malaysia: A Case Study. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(3), 483-495.
- Duff, P. A. (2001). Language, literacy, content, and (pop) culture: Challenges for ESL students in mainstream courses. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 58(1), 103–132.
- Dornyei, Z., & Csizer, K. (1998). Ten commandments for motivating language learners: results of an empirical study. *Language Teaching Research*, 2(3), 203-229
- Echevarria, J., Vogt, M., & Short, D. (2007). Making content comprehensible for English learners: The SIOP model. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Ellis, R. (1997). Second language acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Gabbin AL. The crisis in accounting education; the CPA's role in attracting the best and the brightest to the profession; 2002.
- Krashen, S. D. (1981), "Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning", Pergamon. Oxford.
- Malaysian Examination Council. (2006), "Malaysian University English Test (MUET)", Kuala Lumpur.
- Mahathir Mohamad. (1991). The way forward. Paper presented at the meeting of the Malaysian Business Council, Kuala Lumpur. Retrieved May 20, 2013, from <http://www.wawasan2020.com/vision/p4.html>.
- Mohd Bakri Musa. (2003). An education system worthy of Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur: Vinlin Press Sdn. Bhd.
- Melor Md, Y., Ainil, S., Mohd Hasrul, K., & Noriah Mohd, I. (2013). "Language Learning Difficulties among Malaysian Gifted Students" *Asian Social Science*, 9(15).
- Kaur, S. & Abdul Manan, S. (2008). The Learning Experiences of postgraduate students: Emergent themes. In Z. Moris, H. Abdul Rahim & S. Abdul Manan (Eds.). Higher Education in the Asia Pacific: Emerging trends in teaching and learning (pp. 14-33). Penang: IPPTN and Universiti Sains Malaysia Press.
- Radha M. K. Nambiar (2007). Enhancing academic literacy among tertiary learners: A Malaysian experience. 3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature, The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies. Vol 13, 77-94
- Rohaila Y, Norasmah O, Faridah K. 2005. Strategi pembelajaran pengalaman berasaskan model kolb dalam pendidikan perakaunan. *Jurnal Pendidikan Malaysia*; 2005: 30:113-28.
- Seda, M. M., Liguori, O. Z., & Seda, C. M. (1999). Bridging literacy and social studies: Engaging prior knowledge through children's books. *TESOL Journal*, 8(3), 34–40.
- Spolsky, B. (1989). Conditions for second language learning. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Sternberg, R. J. & Williams, W. M. (2002). Educational psychology. Boston: Pearson Education Company.
- Thang, S. M. & Azarina Alias. (2007). Investigating readiness for autonomy: a comparison of Malaysian ESL undergraduates of three public universities. *Reflections on English Language Teaching Journal*, 6 (1), 1- 18.
- Wallace J, Wildy H. The changing world of school leadership: working in a professional organisation today. *The Practising Administrator*; 1995: 1:14-7.
- Warren, B., & Rosebery, A. (1995). Equity in the future tense: Redefining relationships among teachers, students, and science in linguistic minority classrooms. In W. Secada, E. Fennema, & L. Adajian (Eds.), *New directions for equity in mathematics education* (pp. 298–328). New York: Cambridge University Press.