

## Exploring International Student Orientation and Attitude towards Learning English in Malaysia

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### Abstract

The Malaysian government is rigorously drawing up strategies to increase the already existing 60,000 foreign students currently studying in the country (The Star, 2009). With the influx of more foreign students and with English as the medium of instruction in local higher education, it is felt that a study to investigate international students' orientation, attitudes and aspects that drive and/or deter them in learning English would be beneficial. The sample for this study (N=115) comprised of international students from China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Korea, Vietnam, Maldives and the Middle East undertaking an Intensive English course at a local private college. Data collection was done via questionnaire which was designed based on a review of existing instruments in the field. Results show that orientation towards learning English does not vary according to nationality and gender; however, students from China and Korea tend to be more inclined towards instrumental orientation, while students from Kazakhstan and Iran are more inclined towards integrative orientation. Based on the findings, this paper also proffers recommendations for local higher education institutions to enhance ELT practices for incoming international students.

### Introduction

Malaysia's intake of international students is steadily growing with renewed and increased efforts towards opening new gateways to attract more foreign students into private and public universities. This direction is in line with the government's objectives to develop Malaysia into an educational hub by the year 2020. According to the National Census 2007 of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE), there are 47,928 foreign students currently studying in the country. Many of these students are not fluent in the English language which is the

medium of instruction in most public and private institutions of higher learning (IHL), and therefore have to undergo English courses prior to entering the desired programmes.

This study aims to investigate the orientation and attitude of these students towards the English language in private IHLs in Malaysia, and outline the reasons behind why students are interested in studying the English language. It is to determine the major aspects that drive them towards learning the language and to identify the factors that play a part in motivating them throughout the learning process. According to Gardner's Theory (1985), motivation may be either integrative or instrumental. The integrative motivated student is one who is driven to learn the English language through identification and association to the culture and people of the target language, whereas the instrumentally motivated learner is one who is driven to learn the target language for the sole purpose of enhancing oneself for job opportunities and monetary means.

The purpose of this study is to enable the private IHLs to better understand the need for English language from the students' perspectives and their attitude towards the language. It will also enable the lecturers of these local institutions to improve their abilities and broaden their perspectives in order to be more sensitive towards the students' needs.

### **Orientation and attitude towards second language learning**

Orientation is the student's motivation to learn the target language and the attitude adopted in the learning process while learning takes place. According to Krashen (1981), orientation is one of the components of the passive cognitive filter that screens the incoming language based on one's motives, needs, attitudes and emotional states. Orientation and attitude of a student towards the learning of a subject could be based on many different aspects. A student's drive to learn the English language could be triggered simply based on mere curiosity of the culture and tradition of the target language. The love of knowing a new language and habits of the people could be a major source of motivation for the student to pursue the English language. It could also be due to the student's need to understand English movies and assimilate themselves with the Western culture that has a major influence on today's trends. It is to have a sense of accomplishment of acquiring a new language in order to understand a new trend and gain identity in the wider language community. According to Gardner's (1985) theory of motivation, this is known as Integrative Orientation.

Orientation is the key component that shapes the student's attitude throughout the process of successfully obtaining the target language. Integrative orientation is one form of motivation that stimulates the student towards acquiring the English language, especially if they have become a resident in a community that is very much well-versed in the language, in order to socially interact and immerse themselves as one of the members of society. "Integrative motivation typically underlies successful acquisition of a wide range of registers and a native-like pronunciation" (Finegan, 1999, p.568 cited in Norris-Halt, 2009, p.2). "The integratively oriented student is one who is motivated to learn the second language, has openness to identification with the other language community and has favourable attitude towards the language situation" (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003 cited in Vaezi, 2008, p. 54).

Another form of student orientation is through having external elements that motivate a student to pursue the English language. These may include monetary means, better job opportunities, exam results, business deals, etc. According to Gardner (1985), this is the second type of orientation known as Instrumental Orientation. "An instrumentally motivated learner has more pragmatic considerations in his/her mind regarding L2 learning, such as obtaining a job or earning more money", (Vaezi, 2008, p. 54). Students adopt a better attitude towards learning English when they know that there are rewards attached to the learning. They tend to concentrate more on learning the language if it will be substantially beneficial to them. This is usually if the student needs to pass the English exam in order to get good marks or if the learning of the language enables them to be eligible for promotions or higher job positions. However, once the instrumental element is obtained, the interest in learning the language may slowly deteriorate. As cited in Norris-Halt (2009), a study was conducted by Berwick and Ross (1989), where 90 first year Japanese students were found to be instrumentally oriented to study English due to the exam requirements for the university. Upon entering university, the interest towards learning English slowly diminished.

### **English language teaching in Malaysia**

Malaysia is a multi-cultural nation. Many different languages exist within the society. With the existence of vernacular schools and local government schools in the country, many private higher educational institutions have adopted the English stream as their main medium of instruction. Due to the convenience of the country's socio-economic background and the availability of studies in the English language, many foreign students have opted Malaysia as a choice to further their education. Since many of them are not fully versed in the English

language, they have chosen to study English in many of the private sectors in the country. The Malaysian government has also opened doors to facilitate more foreign students to continue their studies in the country.

This study focuses on a private IHL in which most of the international students come from a variety of countries such as China, Iran, Kazakhstan, Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Middle East and Africa. Due to such diverse learning backgrounds, it is a challenge for the lecturers to accommodate all their different learning abilities depending on each individual orientation and attitude towards learning the English language. The student's attitude towards learning English is usually reflected on the type of educational background that they have undergone and their socio-economic expectations. Students from Kazakhstan and Iran are usually more enthusiastic to participate in classroom activities and are not shy to dive into discussions and activities. Students from China on the other hand, are more reserved towards learning English and prefer to absorb the language passively. This could be due to the deductive education that they have undergone and the ever growing 'Mute-English' phenomenon that is occurring throughout China. It is where students learn English passively using the Chinese language and compete with each other for high grades and top scores. This phenomenon takes place when learners have limited access to the culture of the target language as well as foreign language settings. This is the reason why students from China may be more instrumentally motivated as compared to the others. Students from Japan, Korea, Indonesia and the Middle East are more eclectic in their learning approach. This could be because of their more adaptive learning background that allows them to be both integrative and instrumentally motivated. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the students' orientation towards studying English and identify which nationalities are more inclined towards instrumental orientation and integrative orientation.

### **Research questions**

1. Is there a significant difference in the orientation towards learning English?
2. Is there a significant difference in the orientation towards learning English between nationalities?
3. Which nationalities are more inclined towards integrative orientation when studying English?
4. Which nationalities are more inclined towards instrumental orientation when studying English?

5. To what extent does the parents' educational background impact upon the students' orientation towards learning English?
6. Is there a significant difference in orientation between males and females?

## **Research methodology**

### *Participants*

The population included the international students currently studying at a private IHL in Malaysia. A sample of 115 students, 63 male and 52 female, undergoing an intensive English course ranging from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate levels were randomly selected for the study. Data was collected through questionnaire distribution which was designed based on a review of existing instruments in the field.

### *Instrument*

Each participant was given a questionnaire to complete in class which consisted of 37 items based on a 5-point Likert Scale, and an open-ended section to determine the students' attitude towards learning English. Items 1-12 tested their integrative orientation towards the target language, while items 13-25 measured their instrumental orientation towards learning English. Open-ended questions were also included for students to detect changes in motivation after entering the institution and if so, why. An item rating from very bad to very good was also added for respondents to rate their own level of English proficiency. A demographic section was also added to determine the parents' educational background and the students' age, gender, nationality, time spent in Malaysia and reasons for furthering studies.

### *Data analysis procedures*

The data was analyzed using the SPSS programme and analyses included mean, frequency and standard deviation. The paired sample T-Test was used to find the level of differences between integrative and instrumental motivation among the students of different nationalities as well as gender and parent's educational background. The ANOVA test was used to identify differences in orientation among nationalities, and comparison of means was used to differentiate nationalities that were more integrative or instrumentally oriented. Data collected through the open-ended questions were categorized into different groups and analyzed further.

## Results

A total of 115 students were randomly selected as a sample, of which 63 (54.8%) were male and 52 (45.2%) female. Majority of the respondents ranged between the age group of 20-24 (49.6%) and the age group of 15-19 (39.1%). As seen in Table 1 below, 61.7% of respondents were from China, Indonesia (10.4%), Kazakhstan (7.8%), Iran (7.8%), Korea (5.2%), Vietnam (1.7%), Japan (1.7%), Libya (0.9%), Sudan (0.9%) and Maldives (0.9%).

**Table 1: Demography of sample**

Gender		Age				Nationality		
	Frequency	Percent		Frequency	Percent	Country	Frequency	Percent
Male	63	54.8	15-19	45	39.1	China	71	61.7
Female	52	45.2	20-24	57	49.6	Kazakhstan	9	7.8
			25-29	11	9.6	Iran	9	7.8
			30-34	1	0.9	Indonesia	12	10.4
			35 <	1	0.9	Vietnam	2	1.7
						Korea	6	5.2
						Japan	2	1.7
						Libya	1	0.9
						Sudan	1	0.9
						Maldives	1	0.9
						Missing	1	0.9
Total	115	100	Total	115	100	Total	115	100

As shown in Table 2 below, majority of the participants who are currently studying English have resided in Malaysia for 1-3 months with a percentage of 46.1%. 26.1% have resided in Malaysia for 4-6 months, 13% between 7-11 months and 14.8% have resided in Malaysia for a year or more. Majority of the students agreed that the reason they are residing in Malaysia to study English was to further their studies.

**Table 2: Duration of stay in Malaysia**

Duration of Stay	Frequency	Percent (%)
1-3 months	53	46.1
4-6 months	30	26.1
7-11 months	15	13.0
1 year and above	17	14.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>100</b>

The numbers of languages the participants were able to speak and the number of languages they were able to write were also analyzed. Table 3 summarizes these findings. Majority of the students are bilingual in both the spoken and written aspect, with the Chinese students having the highest frequency of 67, being able to speak and write more than one language.

**Table 3: Number of languages spoken and written**

Nationality	Languages Spoken				Languages Written			
	1	2	3	4<	1	2	3	4<
China	3	50	13	4	3	58	6	3
Kazakhstan	1	0	6	2	1	1	6	1
Iran	0	7	2	0	0	8	1	0
Indonesia	0	8	4	0	1	9	2	1
Vietnam	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0
Korea	0	5	1	0	0	5	1	0
Japan	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0
Libya	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Sudan	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Maldives	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>

This could be due to China's vast geography and cultural diversity. The advantage of the students being bilingual may affect their attitude towards language learning and may find it easier to acquire the English language.

Further analysis was done in order to answer the first research question on whether there is a significant difference in orientation when learning English. Paired sample t-test was applied to determine this difference. The total mean of the integrative orientation items ( $M=4.12$ ) and the total mean of the instrumental items ( $M=4.2442$ ) were statistically calculated and it was found that there was no significant difference in orientation when studying English, where  $t=-1.87$  and  $p=0.06$ , as seen in Table 4 below.

**Table 4: Difference in orientation when learning English**

Orientation	Kulliyah of Respondent		Value	df	Level of Significance
	Integrative (n=115)	Instrumental (n=115)			
Mean	4.12	4.24	-1.87	114	0.06 (NS)
Std. Deviation	0.54	0.57			
<i>2-tailed</i>	<i>p &lt; .05</i>		<i>S = Significant</i>		<i>NS = Not Significant</i>

The findings above do not support Crookes and Schmidt's theory on motivation for language learning that individuals have their own reasons to motivate them to acquire a language, where orientation depends on the goal of learning a language (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991).

The ANOVA test was used to determine whether there is a significant difference in orientation between nationalities. Table 5 below shows that there is no significant difference in integrative and instrumental orientation between nationalities.

**Table 5: Difference in orientation between nationalities**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
INT	Between Groups	0.58	9	0.07	0.21	0.99 (NS)
	Within Groups	32.53	104	0.31		
	Total	33.11	113			
INS	Between Groups	1.54	9	0.17	0.50	0.88 (NS)
	Within Groups	35.99	104	0.35		
	Total	37.53	113			
<i>2-tailed</i>		<i>p &lt; .05</i>		<i>S = Significant</i>		<i>NS = Not Significant</i>

There is no significant difference in both modes of orientation among the students, where  $p=0.99$  for the integrative items and  $p=0.88$  for the instrumental items. Hence, orientation does not differ much between nationalities. However, the total means were compared in order to identify which nationalities would be more inclined towards integrative orientation, and which would be more inclined towards instrumental orientation. The results are shown in Table 6:

**Table 6: Nationalities that are integrative and instrumentally motivated**

Nationality	N	Integrative Orientation		Instrumental Orientation	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
China	71	4.20	0.59	4.23	0.59
Kazakhstan	9	4.21	0.51	4.14	0.69
Iran	9	4.08	0.47	3.77	0.98
Indonesia	12	4.17	0.55	4.29	0.69
Vietnam	2	3.79	0.53	4.00	0.98
Korea	6	4.11	0.40	4.26	0.32
Japan	2	4.20	0.47	4.50	0.49
Libya	1	3.83	-	3.83	-
Sudan	1	4.08	-	4.62	-
Maldives	1	4.42	-	4.23	-
Not included	1				
Total	1	4.1776	0.54128	4.2450	0.57631

It was found from the table above that students from China ( $M=4.2343$ ), Indonesia ( $M=4.2885$ ), Vietnam ( $M=4.0000$ ), Korea ( $M=4.2564$ ), Japan ( $M=4.4957$ ) and Sudan ( $M=4.46154$ ) were more instrumentally motivated to study English. Students from Kazakhstan ( $M=4.2083$ ), Iran ( $M=4.0833$ ) and Maldives ( $M=4.4167$ ) were more inclined towards integrative motivation when studying English. Due to the fact that there is only one respondent from Libya, Sudan and Maldives, it is therefore not a fair representation of its population.

A descriptive analysis was done to determine whether or not the parents' educational background have an effect on the participants' orientation towards learning English. The findings found are as follows:

**Table 7: Parents' educational background**

Nationality	Father's Educational Background		Mother's Educational Background	
	Graduate	Non-Graduate	Graduate	Non-Graduate
China	43	26	36	34
Kazakhstan	8	1	8	1
Iran	7	2	5	4
Indonesia	4	8	6	6
Vietnam	2	0	2	0
Korea	5	1	3	2
Japan	1	1	1	1
Libya	1	0	0	1
Sudan	1	0	1	1
Maldives	1	0	0	1
Not Answered	3		Not Answered	3
Total	115		Total	115

It can be seen from Table 7 that students from China have the highest number of graduate parents, followed by Kazakhstan with a high majority of both parents being graduates, Iran and Korea. Indonesian students, on the other hand, have a majority of parents who are not graduates. It can be concluded, therefore, that the parents' educational background does not have a major effect on student orientation towards learning English.

An independent sample t-test was also conducted to identify any differences in orientation among males and females. It was found that there is no significant difference in orientation among males and females, where  $p=0.33$  for integrative orientation, and  $p=0.08$  for instrumental orientation. Therefore, it can be concluded that gender does not play a role in affecting student orientation towards learning English. This does not comply with the theory that "gender is one of the personal variables that have been related to differences found in motivational functioning and self-regulated learning" (Rusillo & Arias, 2004, p. 100).

**Table 8: Difference in orientation between males and females**

		Gender of Respondent		t-Tests		
		Male (n=63)	Female (n=52)	Value	df	Level of Significance
<b>Integrative</b>	Mean	4.13	4.23	-0.97	113	0.33 (NS)
	Std. Deviation	0.59	0.47			
<b>Instrumental</b>	Mean	4.16	4.35	-1.77	113	0.08 (NS)
	Std. Deviation	0.62	0.50			
<i>2-tailed</i>		$p < .05$		<i>S = Significant</i>	<i>NS = Not Significant</i>	

Item number 26 of the questionnaire required the participants to rate their English proficiency. As seen in the data below (Table 9), more than half rated their English proficiency to be average with a percentage of 67.8%, followed by a percentage of 19.1% who rated good. 9.6% of the participants rated their English proficiency to be bad while 3.5%

rated their English to be very good. None of the participants rated their English proficiency as very bad.

**Table 9: Student self-perceived English proficiency**

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
Very Bad	0	0
Bad	11	9.6
Average	78	67.8
Good	22	19.1
Very Good	4	3.5
Total	115	100

An open-ended section was also included in the questionnaire, where respondents were asked whether they were motivated to study English in High School. Participants were asked to give reasons as to why they had high or low orientation towards learning English. The percentage of orientation is as follows:

**Table 10: Level of orientation to learn English when in high school**

<b>Rating</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
Yes (high orientation)	72	62.6
No (low orientation)	13	11.3
Not answered	30	26.1
Total	115	100

Majority of the students agreed that they had high orientation to study English with a percentage of 62.6%. The reasons given for high orientation include ‘important for future’ and ‘forced to study’, which are categorized as instrumental orientation. Other reasons include ‘easy to understand’, ‘like watching and listening to English songs/movies’, ‘interested to learn more about the language’ and ‘motivated by teacher’ which are categorized as integrative orientation. Reasons given for low orientation include ‘difficult to understand’ and ‘did not study hard’, which are both instrumental orientation, and ‘not interested to study the language’, which is categorized as low integrative orientation. 26.1% did not provide any answers for this item.

The last item of the instrument questioned the students on whether they were more or less motivated to learn English after entering a private college in the country. This question is to

determine if students' orientation diminishes upon entering college or if the educational institution has effected student orientation to study English. The results are as follows:

**Table 11: Level of orientation to learn English at private higher educational institutions in Malaysia**

Rating	Frequency	Percent (%)
More	89	77.4
Less	15	4.3
Not answered	21	18.3
Total	115	100

A majority of students agreed that they are more motivated to learn English in the college with a percentage of 77.4%. Reasons of high instrumental orientation include 'good syllabus' and 'to finish the course quickly'. Reasons for high integrative orientation include 'teachers', 'environment' and 'to know the language in detail'. However, 43% stated that they were less motivated to study English in the college due to low instrumental orientation of 'learning too much in a short time', while low integrative orientation include 'not liking the teachers'. 18.3% did not provide any answers for this item.

### Discussion

This study was conducted to investigate the orientation and attitude of foreign students who are currently studying the English language. It was found that orientation among foreign students do not vary according to nationality and gender. However, majority of the students are more inclined to be instrumentally motivated with more nationality groups agreeing with instrumental orientation. Students from China, Korea, Japan, Indonesia and Sudan tend to be more instrumentally oriented. Students from Iran, Kazakhstan, and Maldives were more inclined towards integrative orientation. It is interesting to note that the instrumentally oriented groups are the groups who are usually more passive and reserved in class while the groups who are more inclined towards integrative orientation are more active in speaking and willing to participate in classroom activities and discussions. "The emergence of orientation is, to a large extent, determined by 'who learns what in what milieu'" (Clement & Kruidenier, 1983, p. 288).

In general, students are highly motivated to study English, regardless whether they are integrative or instrumentally driven. This could be due to the fact that majority of the

respondents are multilingual, being able to speak and write more than one language, and therefore not afraid to approach the English language. Respondents have had the experience of acquiring other languages other than their own, therefore not finding it too difficult to pursue yet another language. For example, students from Kazakhstan are mostly bilingual knowing both Kazakh and Russian. Most Kazakhs have to undergo a schooling system which is conducted in Russian, while also acquiring their own mother tongue. Chinese students also come from a multilingual society which has numerous dialects and languages. Therefore learning another language to them is not foreign, and hence, enabling them to approach the English language positively.

It is also evident that student orientation to learn English does not matter whether or not their parents are graduates. Orientation depends on the students' attitude themselves and how they perceive things to be. Students may be studies oriented and prefer self advancement for professional gain, hence adopting a more instrumental approach, while others may be more people or culture oriented and interested in social advancement, hence adopting a more integrative approach. According to Lambert (1963b), "the extent to which an individual successfully acquires a second language will depend upon ethnocentric tendencies, attitude towards the other community, orientation towards language learning and motivation" (Moiinvaziri, 7007).

## **Recommendations**

### *Recommendations for institutions and educators*

Lecturers and institutions need to make studying English a more motivating experience for the students. This can be done by engaging students in a more interactive and interesting approach towards language learning. Short term obtainable goals should also be set for students to achieve in order to give them a sense of accomplishment and give them the desire to want to continue with the learning. Institutions can also promote integrative orientation by organizing exchange programmes and interaction with other universities to increase language proficiency. Instrumental orientation can also be given by exposing students to the wide spectrum of opportunities that are open to them upon acquiring the language.

### *Recommendations for future research*

As this study focuses on orientation of international students, it would be recommended that further research be done on orientation of working foreigners towards learning English. Other

fields of study could include orientation of Malaysian students towards learning English, and the orientation of Malaysian students who are studying abroad in English speaking countries. Researchers could also measure aspects such as aptitude and academic success that result from learning the language.

## Conclusion

Regardless whether students are inclined towards integrative orientation or instrumental orientation, institutions and lecturers need to keep students engrossed in learning the language and inculcate the passion for studying English. Institutions should give students reason to want to pursue English and instill importance in the language. Students should be able to understand the purpose of their learning and see concrete results. Each individual student may be motivated in many ways, therefore lecturers need to understand their orientation and cater to their needs. Students should feel a sense of accomplishment by being able to converse in the target language which will result in a high orientation rate. Hence, this study has identified the differences in orientation among students in order to allow better learning to take place.

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