

An Investigation into the Changes in Perceptions of and Attitudes Towards Learning English in a Malaysian College

S. Chee Choy

Tunku Abdul Rahman College

Salah Troudi

University of Exeter

This paper reports on an investigation into the changes in students' attitudes towards learning English in a Malaysian college. The main focus of the study is to investigate the changes in attitudes towards learning English during the critical transition period from secondary school, where the medium of instruction is Malay, to college, where the medium of instruction is in English. Other factors like classroom and school environment, teaching methodologies, and the influence of home background were also considered. A sample of 100 students enrolled in a first level English course during their first semester in a Malaysian college was used for the study. Data were collected using students' weekly journals and interviews of students. Analysis of the data was done qualitatively using an interpretive approach. The findings revealed that there were differences in students' perceptions of and attitudes towards learning English in secondary school and college. Students' attitudes seemed more positive in college and they perceived the college social and classroom environment to be more conducive for learning English. The implications from the study suggest that the school social environment and the family background influence students' attitudes towards learning English.

In 2000, a special committee was established by the ministry of education in Malaysia to determine the reasons behind the steadily declining standards of English among students. The findings of this committee revealed many weaknesses in the education system most of them well known to educators and school administrators in Malaysia. Many Malaysian students enrolling in college for higher level courses after their Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), the Malaysian equivalent of the British 'O'-levels examinations, experience difficulties coping with English as a medium of instruction. This decline in the standard of English in Malaysia was highlighted in media reports (Chok, 2001). This problem had been evident ever since the government decided to change the medium of instruction in schools from English to Malay in 1983. However, this problem only became critical in the early 1990's (Abdul Kahrim, 1991). Apart from the limited exposure to English in school, there are several other key issues like the growing disparity in competence in English among students and a lack of English competence among teachers that have also played a role in the decline of the language.

Currently, English is taught as a second language in Malaysia but it is more perceived by students as a foreign language. In fact, English does not play a part in their lives outside of school. Therefore, this study is interested in exploring how the school and social environments of Malaysian students could influence their perceptions of and attitudes towards English because such perceptions could influence their ability to learn this language. This study could provide useful information for others outside Malaysia who face similar situations.

Research by MacIntyre and Charos (1996); Williams and Burden (1997); and Williams, Burden, and Lanvers (2002) have concentrated on students' attitudes towards and motivation to learn a second or foreign language. However these studies used Western populations learning a second European language and the applicability of the results obtained to Malaysian students is questionable. There is little research on Malaysian learners' attitudes and perceptions of learning English. Prior to this, much research on Malaysian students has focused on factors like the influence of socio-economic backgrounds (Pillay, 1998) and reluctance to read (Pandian, 2000). According to Pandian, Malaysian students read only materials necessary to get their work done rather than reading for leisure. A recent study by Littlewood (2000) seemed to provide interesting findings on the attitudes of Malaysian students, but the study lacked much depth because it did not explain how the attitudes of these students influenced their learning of English. The study focused on students' attitudes in an English language classroom rather than student attitudes towards learning English.

The Nature of Learning Language

The perceptions of individuals about language learning, their motives for learning the language, the feelings they have of themselves, and their attitudes may influence how well they will eventually learn the language. These are all socially formed. In addition, learning takes place in a social context. Such learning involves a dynamic interplay among teachers, learners, and tasks involved (Williams and Burden, 1997). The

social nature of learning is also emphasized by Lave and Wenger (1991) who proposed the term *situated learning*. They argue that learning takes place within a stoical situation and depends on the situation even when there is no intended learning taking place. This study is informed by the tenets of sociocultural theory, which is concerned with how cognition and learning are shaped by the social and cultural contexts that surround the individual (Lantolf, 2000). In this theory, meaning is socially constructed as people engage in their world and interpret it. Exploring these notions in education, some researchers have focused on the social context in analyzing educational practice (Maybin 1994; Mercer 1995). In English language teaching, a number of studies adopted a sociocultural framework to look into various aspects of second and foreign language learning (Kramsch 2000; Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001). At the level of discourse, Gumpertz (1982) shows how social cultural conventions affect all levels of speech production and introduction. Fundamental to sociocultural theory is the view that learning is a collaborative achievement situated in the discursive interactions that take place in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The human mind is mediated, and language is a mediation tool in the learning process.

Williams and Burden's (1997) social constructivist model identified four key factors which influence the learning process – *teachers, learners, tasks, and context*. They note that these factors do not exist in isolation but are in a dynamic interaction. A teacher's perception about teaching and learning will often be reflected in the tasks they select. Learners will then interpret these tasks in the manner which will be most meaningful to them. When teachers and learners interact, their values, perceptions and attitudes will be reflected. The manner in which teachers behave in classrooms will reflect their perceptions and values. The way in which learners react to these behaviors will reflect their individual character and the feelings that the teacher conveys to them. Besides the influence of teachers on learners, the nature of the tasks will determine how this learning will be shaped. This context of learning includes the emotional environment like trust and belonging, the physical environment, the school environment, the cultural environment, and the social environment.

The influence of individual perceptions and attitudes on a learning situation is emphasized by Lave and Wenger (1991) in their social learning process called *legitimate peripheral learning*. Here the student is perceived as actively taking part in the learning process with constant guidance from the "master," which suggests that student attitudes and perceptions towards the learning process could be important in

determining how well they learn. They note that all learning is based on situations to which learners are exposed. In such situations, learners are not passive receivers of knowledge, but are involved in a process called *legitimate peripheral participation* where they initially learn from others more skilled than them.

Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) noted that attitudes exert a directive influence on behavior. An individual's attitudes towards something will influence his or her overall patterns of responses to it. According to Ajzen and Fishbein, the chief determinant to perform a particular behavior is an individual's intention. This intention is a function of two basic factors, the "attitude towards the behavior" and the "subjective norm." The subjective norm refers to an individual's perception of the social pressures put on him or her to perform the behavior in question. If there is a conflict between the two determinants, then the attitudes of the individual will determine the behavior to be exhibited. Gardner (1985) further supported the sociocultural influence in his *socio-educational model* of language learning, noting that "students' attitudes towards the specific language group are bound to influence how successful they will be in incorporating aspects of that language" (p. 6).

Gardner researched a number of factors influencing attitudes and motivation which were thought to influence second language learning. The results of his studies showed three major findings. First, the attitudes and motivation of an individual toward other cultures and learning the second language correlated with proficiency in the language; that is, positive attitudes and better overall motivation generally results in better proficiency. However, the greater predictor of success in learning language is the individual's attitude towards the language. Second, these attitudes will also determine the extent to which individuals will actively involve themselves in learning the language. They may use the language in their everyday conversations or when speaking with proficient speakers of the language to improve their command of the language. Third, the reasons behind individuals' learning the language may also influence success in it because they reflect differences in motivation. That is, if individuals learn a language for integration into the culture, are highly motivated, and have positive attitudes toward the learning situation, they may experience better achievement in the language (Masgoret & Gardner, 1999). More recently Dornyei (2001) stresses the complexity of researching constructs such as motivation because of the multitude of factors that are intertwined with it. For example, he talks of social versus personal motivation, and he stresses the challenge of constructing a definition that can encompass the various theories and manifold meanings carried by the concept "motivation."

The Present Study

Drawing upon the concept that language learning is social in nature and the importance of giving voice to students' perceptions of and attitudes towards learning a second language (Nunan, 2003), the current investigation was conducted using a qualitative approach.

The main research questions underpinning this study were:

1. What were the attitudes of students in college toward learning English when they were in secondary school?
2. What are the attitudes of these students in college?

The investigation was carried out in one of the branches of a college in the North of Malaysia with a student population of 2000 coming from all the states in Malaysia. The sample for this study consists of 100 students from the May 2001 intake who were enrolled in their first level English course during their first semester in college. These students were First-year Certificate and Diploma students enrolled for 2-year courses in business studies and computer science. All the courses offered are conducted in English, with the exception of certain subjects that are required to be in Malay. The first level English course focuses on helping students improve their grammar, comprehension, and writing skills. Each student has 4 contact hours per week spread over an 18-week period.

Methods

The research questions led us to the interpretive approach. Attitudes are often formed as a result of an individual's unique perceptions of things (Lefton, 1997), implying a need for an in depth and insightful analysis of the data obtained. The aim of this approach is to view reality as being socially constructed where the behaviors of individuals are being continuously interpreted and reinterpreted to give a meaningful explanation to behaviors usually within a particular context (Holliday, 2002; Radnor, 2002) The meanings obtained in this manner are actually conceptualized, temporary knowledge (Greene, 2000).

Design and Procedure

Two sources of data were used: student weekly journals and student interviews. The 100 students were asked to write on guided topics over a ten-week

period for their journals and a total of six students were selected from this sample to be interviewed.

The topics for the student journals were developed based on a review of relevant literature and discussion with the five English language lecturers at the college campus. An initial list of fifteen questions was adjusted until there was finally a list of ten questions. The ten topics on the weekly journals were piloted on 20 students participating in the study to check the consistency of responses. The purpose and significance of the study was explained to the students and their assistance was requested. Writing of the weekly journals was done over a ten-week period as part of their English course requirement. (See Table 1 for a list of the weekly journal questions). The students were asked to use a pseudonym when writing the journals. Any student not wishing to participate was given a chance to opt out of the sample group into another group. None elected to do so. There was a high rate of returns for the journals every week; the range of rates of return was from 95% to 100% each week.

The semi-structured interviews with the six students took place at the end of the semester to give more depth to the information found in the journals. The data from these interviews were incorporated into those obtained from the journals.

Analysis of the journals and interviews was done using the process of topic ordering, a term used by Radnor (2002) to describe the process of preparing qualitative data for analysis. Using this process the transcripts were analyzed inductively. The main categories were allowed to emerge from the data through repeated reading of the data. The transcripts and journals were read a number of times in order for the categories to become more evident. The final categorization of the data was checked by another researcher for consistency in the categorization of the data.

Participants

The sample taken for this study is only from one college in the northern region of Malaysia. Because the study was grounded in the interpretive approach, total objectivity and neutrality in the data analysis process cannot be claimed. We approached students' value-laden responses from our own understanding and definition of learning. We acknowledge our own subjectivity, which we managed by respecting the worlds and sensitivities of the participants in the research context (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Holliday, 2002). Even though the results may only be relevant directly to a Malaysian population, they could provide information relevant to other populations in similar situations.

TABLE 1
Weekly Topics for Student Journals

Week	Journal Question
1	When you were in secondary school, how were you taught the English Language? Explain some of the methods that your teachers used to teach you.
2	How did you like the manner in which English was taught to you when you were in secondary school? What did you like? What did you not like?
3	How much do you like using English? How much do you like English?
4	Explain how you feel about using English in your everyday conversation.
5	How do you feel about English now that this language is used to teach you? How did you feel about the English language during secondary school?
6	In what way do you feel that the English course you are attending is helping you improve in learning the language? Explain.
7	In what way could your English language classes be improved?
8	You have been in this course eight weeks. What sort of relationship do you have with your course mates and your English lecturer?
9	Describe a lesson you have enjoyed. Describe a lesson you have not enjoyed.
10	You are now toward the end of your English course. What do you feel about the course as a whole?

Results

It was found on initial analysis of the data that students' attitudes toward learning English seem to have changed since they left secondary school to study in college. In order to differentiate between students' attitudes during secondary school and in college, sentences in their journals with keywords and phrases like "before," "secondary school," "previous school," and "my school last time" were interpreted as referring to their secondary schools. While sentences with keywords and phrases like "here," "studying now," "in this place," and "in college" were interpreted as referring to college.

Students' Attitudes Towards Learning English During Secondary School

The analysis resulted in seven thematic categories that summarize student attitudes and experiences of learning English in secondary schools (see Table 2). Those categories are discussed in more detail next.

Dependence on teachers

Ninety-eight percent of the respondents wrote that they were dependent on their teachers to provide

them with all the necessary directions and strategies to learn English and they would seldom attempt to learn the language on their own. They seemed to perceive their teachers as authorities in the English language. For instance, one of them wrote:

When I learn English I usually wait for my teachers, who are the expert and authority in English, to teach me and help me learn the language.

Other statements by the respondents suggest that they also looked upon these teachers as giving them information about the language. The following excerpt illustrates this point:

I depend on my teachers to give me model essays to memorize so that I can use these to help me write my own essays. They should know what is good for me; they are the authorities in English. If I have a problem with my English I will go to my teacher for help.

This dependency on teachers probably arose from the structured approach that is used to teach these students English in secondary school where they were expected to follow closely directions and instructions from their teachers.

TABLE 2
Students' Attitudes Towards Learning English During Secondary School

Categories	Definitions	Percentage ¹
Dependence on teachers	Dependence on their teachers as authorities to give directions, information and strategies for learning English	98
Difficulty	View that English is a difficult language to learn	89
International language	Language is popular and widely used internationally	85
Dislike of speaking	Being unwilling to speak English	80
Lack of choice	Having no choice but learn English	75
Language anxiety	Experiences fear and/or anxiety when using or having to use English	65
Language being unimportant	English is not perceived as an important medium for communication	62

¹Percentage of students mentioning each category in their journals or interviews.

Difficulty

Eighty-nine percent of these respondents wrote that it was difficult to learn English, and they tended to link this to a dislike when learning it during secondary school. Some of them explained they had difficulty remembering vocabulary and understanding the grammar. For example Student BB said during his interview:

I have difficulty understanding English in school, I do not understand my lessons and I do not like the language because it is very difficult to become good in it.

A few respondents felt that the grammar and vocabulary was difficult to master as illustrated by:

The grammar and vocabulary is so difficult for me to remember and I find it is so difficult to learn the language in secondary school.

Others just felt that English was difficult to learn without further elaboration:

I feel that English is a very difficult language to learn.

These students seem to perceive their difficulties in understanding and learning English as something beyond their control; they seem to have an external locus of control. They could put less effort into learning English because of their perception that difficulty of the language was beyond their control

and extra effort would not help them improve. As suggested by Williams and Burden (1997), it would seem that students' perceptions of the content of what they are to learn could influence how much they will learn.

International language

A majority of the respondents (85%) wrote they had positive attitudes towards English and learning it because it is an international language. Many also wrote that they have to use English to communicate with people from other countries; therefore, they felt it was important to learn it. Two examples from students' responses are shown:

I like to learn English because it is an international language and I can use it to communicate with people from other countries.

I will have to use English if I visit other countries therefore I like to learn English because it is an international language.

In Malaysia, English is considered by the government to be an important second language to learn in order for the country to become developed and recognized internationally (Abdul Kahrim, 1991). Therefore, the attitude of these students towards English as an international language seem to be reflective of the role the government wants it to play in helping Malaysia become more globally recognized as a nation ready to meet the challenges of this century.

Dislike of speaking

Eighty percent of the students wrote that they were reluctant speakers of English. They perceived that they could learn the language better by listening to others speak rather than speaking the language themselves. Others wrote that they felt tongue tied whenever they had to speak English, and they perceived that they were able to express themselves better in Mandarin or Malay. For instance Student L during her interview explained:

I feel very tongue tied when I speak English. I cannot find the words to express myself so I would speak to my teachers and classmates in Malay or Mandarin.

On a similar note some of the respondents wrote:

I would be able to express myself better in Mandarin because I am more used to it in my daily life. When I use the language I do not need to think about what I want to say, it just comes automatically. But with English I cannot express myself well.

These students during secondary school may not have had language learning environments where they could feel safe learning from their mistakes in English.

Lack of choice

A majority of the respondents (75%) wrote they could not choose whether they wanted to learn the language because it was a compulsory subject in school. One of them wrote:

English was one of the many lessons I had to learn in school. I had no choice but to learn it. The teacher said it was compulsory for us to learn English.

Other respondents felt they were compelled to learn English:

I do not like English but I have to learn it because it is a compulsory subject in school.

A number of them wrote that they did not speak English in school but they had to learn it anyway:

I did not use the language in secondary school but I had to learn the language anyway.

They tended to have an external locus of causality (Rotter, 1966) over learning the language. Students may see learning English as beyond their control because

they are forced to learn the subject in school. Their success or failure may not be the result of the effort they put in but rather on the difficulty of the examination paper. Passing examinations would be one of the indicators that they have learned English in Malaysian schools. This finding also supports Williams and Burden's (1997) suggestion that the nature of tasks will determine how learning will be shaped.

Language anxiety

Sixty-five percent of the respondents wrote that they were afraid of making mistakes when speaking English. Many of them were also very anxious about being correct when they spoke English. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) used the term *language anxiety* to describe the feeling of tension and apprehension when speaking a SFL. For example, one of the respondents wrote:

I am afraid of using the wrong words when speaking English, I may get the pronunciation wrong and use the wrong words. I am afraid to answer because I am not sure of what was said. I am afraid of making mistakes. I often repeat to myself or write down on a piece of paper what I want to say to avoid mistakes.

Another respondent wrote that she translated from another language before she spoke:

I do not like to speak English because I am afraid of making mistakes. I want to make sure that my sentence is correct before I speak in English. So I translate from Mandarin before I speak so that I do not make so many mistakes.

Similarly Tsui's (1996) and Liu's (1989) studies on anxious second language learners found that Chinese second language learners tend to be nervous when called upon by their teachers to speak in class. These students may rehearse what they want to say before actually speaking it as a strategy to avoid making mistakes, which could limit their ability to conduct a conversation in English. The language anxiety experienced by these students could be one of the reasons why they dislike speaking English.

Some of the respondents wrote that they had no confidence using or speaking English in secondary school. They did not feel they could speak the language well even though they had been studying English as a subject for eleven years in primary and secondary school. For example, one of them wrote:

I cannot speak English well and I feel I have no confidence when I speak the language. I try to

avoid having to use the language especially with people who speak it well. I also do not answer questions in class unless I have to.

Schunk (1991) and Bandura (1997) indicate that individuals with low self-efficacy tend to avoid a given task. In this case students wanted to avoid speaking and using English in their interactions because they lacked feelings of self-efficacy when using the language. This finding also suggests that legitimate peripheral learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) takes place in the classroom, but the learning may not be what is targeted for students. In the Malaysian classroom students may have learned to be afraid of English from their observation of what happened to their classmates.

Language being unimportant

Sixty-two percent of the respondents wrote that they felt that the language was not important in secondary school, as they were not required to use it then. For instance Student LL during his interview said:

I actually did not feel that English was important in secondary schools. In secondary school I gave up on the language, as all my lessons were in BM (Malay). I felt that English was not an important subject and did not take it seriously.

Other respondents wrote that they were told English was important but did not feel its importance in secondary school:

Although my teacher in secondary school said it was important to learn English, I did not feel it was very important until College.

Some of the respondents felt that English was not important because their families did not speak the language:

I do not use it at home and I do not speak to my family in English and the language is so hard to learn. I felt it was not that important to learn the language.

This finding suggests that the context in which learning takes place is important, as this would make it meaningful for students. As suggested by Williams and Burden (1997) the influence of the external environment on students' perception of learning a language would be important in determining their success in learning it.

In sum, during secondary school, the students liked English because it is a popular international language. They felt that learning English would enable them to

make more friends and perhaps expand their social circle. They also appeared to be extrinsically motivated to learn English.

These students perceived the language to be difficult to learn which could explain their dislike of speaking and their language anxiety. Their perceptions that they had no choice about learning English and having to pass examinations further explain this anxiety.

The findings seem to reflect a mixture of both positive and negative attitudes. The reason for this could be the conflicting ideas about English these students are exposed to in Malaysia. There is evidence from the media that English plays an important part in the culture and society of Malaysia. For example, there are advertisements in English displayed on billboards along major roads. In contrast, support for English is absent in Malaysian schools where the medium of instruction is Malay. The difficulties these students have when learning the language and negative experiences when speaking it could result in developing negative attitudes. In other words the students could like the idea of learning English and becoming proficient in it but at the same time have difficulty with the process of learning it. However, the attitudes of these students towards English seem to change after they had been in college a few months.

Students' Attitudes Towards Learning English in College

The analysis resulted in five thematic categories, discussed next, that summarize student attitudes and experiences of learning English in college (see Table 3).

Liking English

Many of the respondents wrote that since they had been in college a few months they had grown to like the language. For example one of them wrote:

I can speak English better now and I think I like the language. I feel that I want to learn more English because I have to use it in my other classes as well.

The students had to use English in other classes as well. They felt more interest in learning the language as shown by the statement:

I can speak English better now and I think I like the language. I do not only use English during my English classes but also Maths and computer science as well. I feel that I want to learn more English.

TABLE 3
Students' Attitudes towards Learning English in College

Categories	Definitions	Percentage ¹
Liking	Liking the language and wanting to learn it	80
Confidence	Being more self-assured when using English	60
Proactive facilitation	Wanting to take a proactive approach in strategies used to learn English	58
Respect	Increases potential of being admired, respected or envied by others	54
Difficulty	View that English is a difficult language to learn	40

¹Percentage of students mentioning each category in their journals or interviews.

Other respondents wrote they liked English better as they had had to use it more in College:

I like English more now that I have the use more of the language in College.

In college, students are able to experience a wider usage of English in their learning environment. Instead of only experiencing the use of this language during English language lessons, they are using it in other subjects and interactions with their peers and lecturers as well. This would enable them to get more exposure to English and obtain a better understanding of how the language is used.

Some of them felt that it was not as difficult to learn the language as they had thought during secondary school and they appeared to express more interest in the language compared to when they were in secondary school. The reason for this change in attitude could be the influence of the learning environment around them, which encourages the use of English. This could be because they have to use more of the language to learn and to communicate. Some excerpts from the respondents are as follows:

I have more friends that I can speak to in English. I am getting better at it. I am also getting more interested in the language now.

I am more interested in learning English now since I have been in College for some time. I think it is not as difficult as I once thought it was.

Confidence

More than half of the respondents (60%) wrote they have become more confident speaking English since they had been in college. They felt better about

speaking to their friends and lecturers in English. Although many of them wrote that they still had problems with English, in general they felt more confident speaking the language. Some of excerpts from the respondents are as follows

I feel more confident about using English now that I have been using and learning the language for some time.

I think I can speak better in English and I feel more confident about the language.

Some of the respondents wrote that they had positive attitudes towards English and learning it in college because they felt that ability to speak English well would earn them the respect and admiration of their peers. With this ability, they could project themselves as legitimate speakers of English (Higgins, 2003; Norton, 1997). Some of the excerpts illustrating this are as follows:

Using English improves my social status. I think others will look up to me if I speak in English. I know I look up to people who speak English well.

I learn English for the sake of my career and it will also enable me to have a better social standing with me knowing the language. Someone who speaks English seems to be more educated.

An environment that is supportive and accepting of students' efforts to speak English and encourages speaking of the language helps their self-confidence. Ruble, Eisenberg and Higgins (1994) argue that individuals will use social comparisons to learn social norms and the appropriateness of action. In college, it

is an accepted norm for students to speak English to their lecturers and peers compared to secondary school where it was more acceptable to speak in Malay or Mandarin. This social acceptance of English as a medium of communication and instruction in college probably leads to enhanced self-concepts and belief in their ability to speak the language.

Proactive facilitation

Fifty-eight percent of the respondents wrote that they used proactive facilitation techniques, a term for describing techniques used to increase the ability to learn a second language by using and practicing it (Slavin, 1986). Respondents wrote that they practiced speaking the language with friends and others who were proficient in the language in order to become fluent in English. Further, they wrote that they had taken the initiative to speak more English to friends and the responsibility on themselves to learn the language. Using such strategies seems to reflect the characteristics of good language learners proposed by Wenden (1987). The following excerpt illustrates this point:

I want to practise English more and I am not afraid to try speaking the language now. I will speak the language until I become proficient in it.

Respect

Fifty-four percent of the respondents wrote that they wanted to learn English because they felt that others would respect them. They felt that it improved their social status. Excerpts of what they wrote are as follows:

I am respected by my peer when I use English. I feel better about myself when I speak English now.

Now that I am in College I like to use English because I seem to be more respected by others.

It must be noted that this category was not found among the students' attitudes towards learning English during secondary school. They do not appear to perceive the use of English as a means of improving their social status during secondary school, possibly because English was seldom used outside the language classroom unlike the situation in college.

It was interesting to note that some of these students wrote that they learned English to improve their own social status rather than to bring pride to their families, which may be expected for someone from the Chinese culture. For instance Student KK explained during her interview:

I learn English for my own benefit and not for the sake of my family. I think that people who speak English well appear more educated and have better social status.

This finding further suggests that these students are not socially motivated to succeed in English because it will bring prestige and benefits to their families or social groups as suggested by Kurman (2001) and Markus and Kitayama (1998). In contrast, they seemed more interested in succeeding in English for their personal achievements and prestige, which supports research by Littlewood (2000) on the attitudes of Asian students towards the English language. His research indicates that Asian students may enjoy learning collectively, but they had individual ideas of how the groups should be organized to bring about the most learning for their own success.

Difficulty

Forty percent of the respondents wrote that learning and using English was still difficult for them in college compared to 89% in secondary school. They explained the difficulties they still had with the grammar and vocabulary of English. For example one of them wrote:

The grammar and vocabulary is so difficult for me to remember and I find it is so difficult to learn the language although I have been studying using the language in College.

The percentage of respondents finding English difficult to learn had decreased considerably in college when compared to the figures in secondary school. This was probably due to the influence of the learning environments in college, which encourage and require the use of the language. This could be explained by Lave and Wenger's (1991) legitimate peripheral participation. Students' perceptions of English were influenced by teachers who spoke and taught in the language. More exposure to the language could have lessened the apprehensions of these students. Students who still had difficulty with English could be experiencing problems adapting to the learning and social environments of college. These students may be unwilling or unable to adapt to an environment that required them to use English because of certain prejudices against the English language and its culture, low self-concepts, or low self-confidence. This supports Williams' (1994) and Williams and Burden's (1997) suggestion that learning a second language not only involves the learning of a set of grammar or system of rules but also involves an alteration of the self-image,

cultural, and social behaviors as well. Essentially learning English for these students would involve an alteration of the makeup of the whole person.

Conclusion

The results show a change in the attitudes of these students from when they were in secondary school to when they were in college. Attitudes towards learning English seemed to be more positive when they were in college most probably due to environments that encouraged and required the use of English for communication and learning. The results support the finding of Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) that attitudes exert a directive influence on the behavior of individuals. In general, the students appeared to have increased their self-confidence and gained more confidence when speaking the language in college. There also seemed to be more social acceptance of English among these students. This seemed to reflect the findings of Gardner (1985) that positive attitudes and overall better motivation resulted in better proficiency. There were still a number of them who found the language difficult. It is expected there would be some individuals with such attitudes as learning a second language depends on an individual's aptitude towards the language. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

The findings of this study suggest that Malaysian students on the whole do not have enough exposure to English. Many may have poor attitudes towards the language because they do not understand the culture or the nuances of the language. The language is perceived as a necessity for survival in the Malaysian society. Students learn the language because they have to, not because of a love and interest for it. The cause of this attitude could be the result of poor fundamentals in school and lack of a supportive sociocultural environment. It should be noted that students lose interest in studying, especially English even in primary school because of low self-esteem, poor self-confidence, and a lack of motivation to learn from teachers. The pedagogical implications would be to work toward a change of perceptions of Malaysian students. They need to see learning English as fun and interesting, and this can be achieved by creating a positive learning environment. These findings were similar to those found by Zamani (2002). A change of the manner in which English is taught to students could go a long way here. A de-emphasis on examinations and tailoring classes to meet students' needs would be necessary if there is going to be a change in the way English is perceived by Malaysian students. In all, a revamping of the method of delivery is needed. Students need to be encouraged to speak English both in and out of class.

At the same time they need to be exposed to the English culture to help them understand the language better.

References

- Abdul Kahrim, M. R. (1991). *Malaysia Kita*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad.
- Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1980). *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W. H. Freeman & Co.
- Chok, S. L. (2001, May). Bold admission. *New Straits Times*, pp. 8.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.) (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dornyei, Z. (2001). *Teaching and researching motivation*. London: Longman.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitude and motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Greene, J. C. (2000). Qualitative program evaluation: Practice and promise. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 530-542). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gumpertz, J. (1982). *Discourse strategies*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Higgins, C. (2003). "Ownership" of English in the outer circle: An alternative to the NS-NNS dichotomy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37, 615-644.
- Holliday, A. R. (2002). *Doing and writing qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Kramsch, C. (2000). Social discursive constructions of self in L2 learning. In J. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 133-153). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kurman, J. (2001). Self-regulation strategies in achievement settings: Culture and gender differences. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 32(4), 491-503.
- Lantolf, J. (2000). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lantolf, J., & Pavlenko, A. (2001). Second language activity theory: Understanding second language learners as people. In M. Breen (Ed.), *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research* (pp. 141-158). Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. London: Cambridge University Press.

- Lefton, L. A. (1997). *Psychology* (6th ed.). London: Allyn & Bacon.
- Littlewood, W. (2000). Do Asian students really want to listen and obey? *ELT Journal*, 54(1), 31-35.
- Liu, X. H. (1989). *A survey and analysis of English language learning anxiety in secondary school students in the People's Republic of China*. Unpublished master's thesis. East China Normal University, Shanghai, People's Republic of China.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Charos, C. (1996). Personality, attitudes, and affect as predictors of second language communication. *Journal of Language & Social Psychology*, 15(1), 3-26.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gardner, R. C. (1994). The effects of induced anxiety on cognitive processing in second language learning. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 16, 1-17.
- Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1998). The culture psychology of personality. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 29(1), 63-87.
- Masgoret, A-M., & Gardner, R. C. (1999). A causal model of Spanish immigrant adaptation in Canada. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 20(3), 216-236.
- Maybin, J. (1994). Children's voices: Talk, knowledge and identity. In D. Graddol, J. Maybin, & B. Stierer (Eds.), *Researching language and literacy in social context* (pp. 131-150). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Mercer, N. (1995). *The guided construction of knowledge: Talk amongst teachers and learners*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Norton, B. (1997). Language, identity and the ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 409-430.
- Nunan, D. (2003). The impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in the Asia-Pacific region. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37, 589-613.
- Pandian, A. (2000, July). *A study on readership behaviour among multi-ethnic, multi-lingual Malaysian students*. Paper presented at the Seventh International Literacy and Education Research Network (LERN) Conference on Learning, Melbourne.
- Pillay, H. (1998). *Issues in the teaching of English in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Specialist Teachers Training Institute.
- Radnor, H. A. (2002). *Researching your professional practice: Doing interpretive research. Doing qualitative research in educational settings*. London: Open University Press.
- Rotter, J. B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs*, 80(Whole No. 609).
- Ruble, D. N., Eisenberg, R., & Higgins, E.T. (1994). Developmental changes in achievement evaluation: Motivational implications of self-other differences. *Child Development*, 65, 1095-1110.
- Schunk, D. (1991). Self-efficacy and academic motivation. *Educational Psychologist*, 26, 207-231.
- Slavin, R. E. (1986). *Educational psychology: Theory and practice* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Tsui, A. (1996). Reticence and anxiety in second language learning. In K. Bailey & D. Nunan (Eds.), *Voices and viewpoints: Qualitative research in second language education* (pp. 145-167). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wenden, A. L. (1987). How to be a successful language learner: Insights and prescriptions from L2 learners. In A. Wenden, & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning* (pp. 120-200). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Williams, M. (1994). Motivation in foreign and second language learning: an interactive perspective. *Motivation: Recent Developments in Theory and Practice in the UK Educational and Child Psychology*, 11(2), 77-84.
- Williams, M., & Burden, R. L. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, M., Burden, R., & Lanvers, U. (2002). 'French is the language of love and stuff': Student perceptions of issues related to motivation in learning of foreign language. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(4), 530-527.
- Zamani, A. (2002). *The Malay ideals*. Selangor, Malaysia: Syarikat Percetakan Ihsan.

DR. S. CHEE CHOY is a full time administrator of a college. Her area of research interest is in perceptions and attitudes. She is also in teacher training and development and conducts workshops.

DR. SALAH TROUDI is a lecturer with the University of Exeter. His area of research is in language research and TESL. He also has interest in teacher development and teacher training.