

Understanding the Characteristics of Imagined Communities in Low-Proficiency Malaysian Undergraduate ESL Learners

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Abstract: This study investigates the characteristics of imagined communities among low-proficiency English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in Malaysia, guided by Norton's (1997) theoretical framework. A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving 10 Malaysian undergraduate students categorized as low proficiency based on their Malaysian University English Test (MUET) scores. Data collection methods included in-depth interviews and written narratives, providing a comprehensive exploration of participants' imagined communities and their impact on language learning. The findings reveal that low-proficiency learners often have limited and locally oriented imagined communities, which significantly influence their engagement with English. These learners typically envision using English primarily within local contexts, such as in academic settings or for basic communication needs. Their imagined communities are shaped by immediate social environments, including family and peers, which may not provide strong motivation for extensive language learning. This localised vision contrasts with the broader, more global imagined communities observed in high-proficiency learners. The results imply that the learners' imagined communities can influence their proficiency and engagement with the language. Based on these findings, it is recommended that ESL classrooms focus not only on developing proficiency but also on nurturing learners' imagined communities and identities.

Keywords: ESL, Imagined Communities, Language learning, Low-proficiency learners

Introduction

In Malaysia, English is considered a second language and is an essential subject in the educational curriculum. Despite the extensive exposure to English language education, which spans approximately 11 to 16 years, there remains a significant disparity in proficiency levels among Malaysian students (Chiew et al., 2016; Siti & Azalina, 2019). This disparity suggests that factors beyond formal education significantly impact language acquisition. Bonny Norton's (1997) theory of imagined communities, identities, and investment provides a comprehensive framework to explore these sociocultural dimensions of language learning.

Imagined communities, as conceptualised by Anderson (1983) and adapted by Norton (1997), refer to the groups or networks that learners aspire to join. These communities significantly influence learners' motivations and engagement with the language. For low-proficiency learners, their imagined communities are often shaped by immediate social environments, including family, peers, and local media. These environments may not provide strong motivation for extensive language learning, resulting in limited and locally oriented imagined communities (Li, 2009; Norton & Kamal, 2003).

The role of identity in language learning is also crucial. Learners' self-perceptions and the identities they construct through social interactions greatly impact their engagement with English. High-proficiency learners often develop positive linguistic identities, reinforced by supportive environments and clear aspirations. In contrast, low-proficiency learners struggle with negative self-perceptions and limited interaction with English-speaking environments, which hinder their investment in language learning (Gao, Cheng, & Kelly, 2008; Song, 2010).

Literature Review

The concept of imagined communities, initially introduced by Benedict Anderson in 1983, has become a pivotal framework in understanding language learning and identity formation. Anderson (1983) defined imagined communities as social groups that, despite members never meeting, share a collective identity through their imagination. This concept was later adapted by Norton Pierce (1995) to explore how language learners construct their identities with the help of imagined communities.

Anderson (1991) posited that imagined communities are formed through shared languages and collective experiences, often facilitated by printed media. For example, newspaper readers feel connected through the ideas presented in print, leading to a sense of belonging to an imagined community (Anderson, 1991). This idea is further elaborated by Kanno and Norton (2003), who describe imagined communities as groups of people connected through imagination, which can significantly influence language learners' motivation and identity.

Norton's (2000) theory of imagined communities emphasizes that learners' investment in language learning is influenced by their envisioned future selves within these communities. For instance, learners who imagine themselves as part of global or professional communities are more likely to invest in language learning to achieve these aspirations. The imagined communities provide a sense of commitment, encouraging learners to engage in activities that align with their future goals (Song, 2010).

The concept of imagined communities is closely related to the idea of communities of practice (CoP), introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991). While CoP involves actual, tangible communities where learning occurs through participation, imagined communities pertain to aspirational and future-oriented groups that learners envision themselves joining. Both concepts highlight the importance of social contexts in learning, but imagined communities focus more on the aspirational aspects of learners' identities (Wenger, 2007).

Studies on imagined communities have shown that learners' motivations and investments in language learning are deeply connected to their desired identities and the communities they aspire to join. For example, Norton and Kamal (2003) found that Pakistani school children were motivated to learn English because they envisioned themselves as part of literate and respected communities. Similarly, Song (2010) demonstrated that Korean immigrants in Canada continued to invest in English learning due to their professional identities and imagined communities as successful professionals.

These findings suggest that educational programs should consider the role of imagined communities in shaping learners' motivations. By creating supportive environments that validate learners' aspirations, educators can enhance motivation and engagement, helping learners to bridge the gap between their current selves and their future imagined identities.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative study, utilising case-study to explore the characteristics of imagined communities among low-proficiency learners. A purposive sampling technique to select participants, leveraging the researcher's judgment and expertise to identify individuals who met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. The study focused on 10 low-proficiency ESL undergraduate students from a Malaysian university, identified based on their Malaysian University English Test (MUET) scores, specifically those who gotten MUET Band 2 and below. Low-proficiency learners, characterised by scoring Band 2 or below in MUET, are identified not only by their lower academic

performance but also by their challenges in practical language usage. This includes communication difficulties, limited vocabulary, and a lack of confidence or opportunities to practice the language. It is important to note that this label of 'low-proficiency' is context-specific and does not necessarily reflect the learners' overall language proficiency or potential for improvement.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and written narratives to ensure a comprehensive exploration of participants' imagined communities and their impact on language learning. The in-depth interviews were conducted via mobile applications to facilitate accessibility and convenience for participants. These interviews aimed to gather detailed information on participants' imagined communities, their engagement with English, and the factors influencing their language learning experiences. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analysed to identify common themes and patterns.

In addition to interviews, participants were asked to write narratives about their experiences with English language learning. These narratives focused on their imagined communities and how these visions influenced their engagement with the language. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data.

Findings and Discussion

Imagined Communities among Low-Proficiency Learners

The analysis of the data gathered from low-proficiency learners revealed several prominent themes related to their imagined communities. These themes reflect the challenges, limitations, and influences that shape their English language learning journey. The themes uncovered in the narratives of low-proficiency learners are (i) Limited Exposure and Usage, and (ii) Unsupportive Social and Peer Influence. These themes highlight the various barriers and factors that impact learners' engagement with English and their imagined communities. Low-proficiency learners will be categorised as LPL, accompanied by the number 1 to 10 (10 respondents altogether). Figure 4.1 below shows the themes identified from the data of low-proficiency learners.

Imagined Communities - LPL	
Limited Exposure and Usage	Unsupportive Social and Peer Influence

Fig. 1 Emerging Themes on Imagined Communities of Low-proficiency ESL Learners)

Limited Exposure and Usage

The theme of "Limited Exposure and Usage" captures a significant barrier faced by low-proficiency learners in their journey to mastering the English language. This theme highlights the lack of opportunities and environments conducive to practising and using English regularly, both in educational settings and in daily life. The narratives of low-proficiency learners reflect a consistent pattern of minimal engagement with English, influenced by factors such as the dominance of native languages in their communities, educational practices that do not prioritise English usage, and limited interaction with English-speaking peers.

Additionally, the challenge of fostering learner autonomy in ESL classrooms is a significant factor that affects language acquisition. In unsupportive environments, learners often experience reduced motivation and investment in learning English due to a lack of encouragement from teachers,

peers, and family, as well as limited access to resources and opportunities for practising English. These unsupportive conditions lead to feelings of isolation and frustration among learners, diminishing their confidence and willingness to invest time and effort into improving their English (Saad, 2024).

This theme aligns with Norton's (2000) theory of imagined communities, which posits that language learners' engagement and investment are deeply influenced by the social groups they aspire to join. For low-proficiency learners, the imagined communities they wish to be part of are often out of reach due to the limited exposure to English. Their experiences highlight the gap between their current language practices and the proficiency needed to integrate into broader English-speaking communities.

The data presented below from low-proficiency learners reveal how this limited exposure impacts their motivation and ability to improve their English skills. Their narratives illustrate the challenges of trying to learn and use a language in environments where English is not commonly spoken or valued:

LPL1 (IV): "I don't use English because people around me use a lot of Malay with me."

LPL3 (IV): "Since young, me and my family don't speak any other language other than Bahasa Malaysia. There is no need to speak English because our area all use Bahasa Melayu."

LPL5 (IV): "...even in our English class, our English teacher use both Malay and English when teaching us. Mostly Malay because we don't understand much in English."

LPL9 (IV): "Usually I use Bahasa Malaysia when talking with my friends because they will reply in BM even if I use English with them."

LPL10 (IV): "I only use English in certain situation like when using social media or in English class. Other than that, I use Bahasa because very few people speak to me in English"

LPL1's statement, "I don't use English because people around me use a lot of Malay with me," highlights a significant barrier in language learning related to limited exposure and usage of English. This theme is pivotal in understanding the challenges faced by low-proficiency learners within the framework of imagined communities as conceptualised by Norton (2001).

LPL1's narrative underlines the influence of the immediate social environment on language use. Norton's theory posits that learners' investment in language learning is closely tied to their imagined identities and the communities they wish to integrate into. For LPL1, the predominance of Malay in her social interactions limits her exposure to and usage of English, thereby constraining her opportunities to practice and improve her English skills. This aligns with the notion that language learning is not only a cognitive process but also a social one, deeply embedded in the contexts and communities learners inhabit.

The limited use of English in LPL1's environment can be further understood through the lens of Communities of Practice (CoP) as proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991). CoP emphasises the role of social interaction and engagement in learning. In LPL1's case, the community around her predominantly communicates in Malay, which means English is not the primary language of the community practice. This lack of engagement with an English-speaking community restricts LPL1's opportunities for legitimate peripheral participation, which is crucial for language acquisition and integration into an imagined community of proficient English speakers.

Moreover, LPL1's situation reflects the broader sociocultural factors that influence language learning. The dominance of Malay in her social circles may be rooted in cultural norms and practices that prioritise the use of the native language over English. This cultural backdrop can create an environment where English is seen as less relevant or necessary for daily communication, further reducing LPL1's motivation and opportunities to use and improve her English.

This narrative also brings to light the importance of creating supportive environments that encourage the use of the target language. Without sufficient exposure and practice, learners like LPL1 struggle to envision themselves as part of an English-speaking community, which is essential for sustained investment in language learning. Therefore, addressing the issue of limited exposure and usage is critical for fostering a more conducive environment for English language acquisition among low-proficiency learners.

LPL3's statement sheds light on the deep-rooted linguistic environment that shapes language acquisition. This narrative highlights how familial and community language practices influence the limited exposure and usage of English among low-proficiency learners.

Norton's (2000) theory of imagined communities and investment in language learning underscores the significance of the social and cultural context in which language learning occurs. For LPL3, the predominant use of Bahasa Malaysia within his family and community significantly limits his exposure to English. This limited exposure directly impacts his ability to envision himself as part of an English-speaking community, thereby reducing his investment in learning the language. Norton's framework suggests that without a clear vision of integrating into an imagined community of English speakers, learners are less likely to commit the necessary resources and effort to learn the language effectively.

The familial and community language practices described by LPL3 can also be analysed through the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP). Learning is viewed as a social process that occurs through participation in communal activities. LPL3's community, which primarily communicates in Bahasa Malaysia, does not provide the necessary environment for legitimate peripheral participation in English. This lack of engagement with English-speaking practices means that LPL3 has fewer opportunities to learn and practice English within his daily social interactions, which is crucial for language acquisition.

Furthermore, the notion of "no need to speak English" reflects a utilitarian approach to language use within LPL3's community. This perspective is influenced by the immediate social and economic needs of the community, where Bahasa Malaysia suffices for all communicative purposes. This utilitarian approach creates a significant barrier for learners like LPL3 to see the value and importance of learning English, further diminishing their motivation and investment.

The sociocultural context described by LPL3 also highlights the role of environmental factors in shaping language learning experiences. In regions where English is not commonly used, learners often struggle to find authentic opportunities to practice the language. This lack of practice hinders their ability to develop proficiency and to imagine themselves as competent English speakers. Addressing this challenge requires creating more opportunities for English exposure and usage within the community, such as through media, educational programs, and social interactions that encourage the use of English.

Similarly, LPL5's statement shows the instructional strategies that inadvertently limit students' exposure to English. This insight provides a crucial perspective on how teaching methods and classroom language practices can impact language proficiency among low-proficiency learners.

From the standpoint of Norton's (2000) theory of imagined communities, the classroom is a critical environment where learners can envision and practice their engagement with English-speaking communities. However, LPL5's experience suggests that the predominant use of Malay in English classes reduces the opportunities for immersive English practice. Norton's theory posits that learners' investment in language learning is influenced by their ability to see themselves as members of an imagined English-speaking community. When English instruction relies heavily on Malay, it undermines this vision, thereby weakening students' motivation and investment in mastering English.

The use of Malay as a primary medium of instruction in English classes also reflects a pragmatic approach to teaching, aimed at ensuring comprehension and minimizing student frustration. While this approach might facilitate immediate understanding, it limits students' exposure to authentic English language use, which is crucial for developing proficiency. This instructional strategy aligns with the need for immersive language environments where learners can engage directly with the target language.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) Communities of Practice (CoP) framework further elucidates the implications of LPL5's classroom experience. In a CoP, learning occurs through active participation in shared practices. The classroom, ideally, should serve as a CoP where English is used as the

primary medium of communication, allowing students to participate in the linguistic practices of the English-speaking community. However, when instruction predominantly occurs in Malay, students are deprived of the opportunity to engage in meaningful English language use, which is necessary for becoming competent members of the English-speaking community.

The reliance on Malay also signals a broader issue of limited resources and support for English language instruction. Teachers might resort to using Malay due to a lack of training, confidence, or resources to effectively teach English in an immersive manner. This situation underscores the need for enhanced teacher training programs that equip educators with the skills and confidence to conduct English classes predominantly in English, thereby providing students with the necessary exposure and practice.

LPL9's narrative highlights the significant influence of social interactions on language usage, specifically illustrating how the predominant use of Bahasa Malaysia (BM) among his friends limits his opportunities to practice English, which underscores a recurring theme among low-proficiency learners: the lack of a supportive linguistic environment conducive to practicing English. Norton's (2000) theory of imagined communities posits that learners invest in language learning to gain access to desired social networks. However, for LPL9, the immediate social network does not support or encourage the use of English, which in turn affects his language learning investment.

LPL9's experience can be analysed through the lens of Communities of Practice (CoP) as proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991). In this framework, learning is viewed as a social process where individuals gain skills through active participation within a community. However, LPL9's community primarily operates in BM, thus limiting his participation in an English-speaking CoP. The lack of peers engaging in English communication reduces his opportunities to develop and practice the language, ultimately hindering his progress.

This situation also reflects a broader societal context where the dominant language within certain communities overshadows efforts to practise a second language. Despite LPL9's attempts to use English, the consistent use of BM by his friends discourages continuous practice, which is crucial for language acquisition. This barrier highlights the need for more supportive environments that encourage bilingual or multilingual interactions to facilitate better language learning outcomes.

Moreover, LPL9's narrative illustrates a gap between his current linguistic reality and his potential imagined community as an English speaker. The persistence of BM in his social interactions demonstrates how imagined communities are often difficult to access when the immediate social context does not align with the learner's language learning goals. Norton's theory suggests that without a supportive community that values and uses the target language, learners might find it challenging to maintain their motivation and investment in learning the language.

Lastly, LPL10's narrative reflects a significant challenge in language learning that stems from the limited use of English in her daily interactions. Her statement highlights a critical barrier for language acquisition: the restricted context in which English is used. According to Norton's (2000) theory of imagined communities, language learners invest in acquiring a new language to gain access to specific social networks and communities. However, for LPL10, the opportunities to engage in English are confined to limited settings, such as social media and English class, which constrains her ability to fully immerse herself in an English-speaking environment.

The analysis of LPL10's experience can be framed within the context of Communities of Practice (CoP) as outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991). In a CoP, learning occurs through participation in a community where members share common practices and languages. However, LPL10's primary community uses Bahasa Malaysia (BM) for communication, limiting her participation in an English-speaking CoP. This lack of engagement in English outside of structured settings like the classroom or online platforms impedes her language development, as consistent practice and immersion are crucial for language proficiency.

Moreover, LPL10's situation underscores the importance of social interaction in language learning. The limited opportunities to use English outside specific contexts suggest a gap between her imagined community as an English speaker and her current linguistic environment. This gap can diminish her motivation and investment in learning the language, as the theory posits that without regular, meaningful engagement in the target language, learners struggle to see the relevance and benefits of their efforts.

Norton's concept of investment in language learning also comes into play here. LPL10's selective use of English indicates a pragmatic approach to language learning, where she invests in English only when it is deemed necessary or beneficial, such as in educational settings or social media interactions. This selective investment reflects a coping strategy to navigate the linguistic realities of her environment, where BM dominates social interactions. However, this also means that her exposure to English is insufficient for achieving higher proficiency levels.

Furthermore, LPL10's reliance on social media for using English suggests the potential role of digital platforms in bridging the gap between her current and imagined communities. While these platforms provide some opportunities for language use, they are not substitutes for real-life interactions that foster deeper language acquisition. The challenge lies in expanding these digital interactions into more substantial, face-to-face communication opportunities.

The analysis of the in-depth interviews (IV) data has highlighted the theme of "Limited Exposure and Usage" among low-proficiency learners, revealing the significant impact of their linguistic environment on their English language learning journey. To further support these findings, we turn to the written narratives (WN) provided by the same learners. These narratives offer additional insights into the constraints and challenges faced by the learners in using English within their daily lives. By examining the written narratives, we can deepen our understanding of how limited exposure and usage of English shape their language learning experiences and imagined communities.

LPL1 (WN): "I remember learning lots of grammar during English class time when I was in secondary schools."

LPL3 (WN): "...use Malay since young and only use English in English class..."

LPL5 (IV): "...Difficult to break habit because so used to speak Malay. I go everywhere people also use Malay, rarely use English..."

LPL10 (WN): "Love watching English movies... Practice speaking sometimes but don't use it when speak with friends because they will laugh at me."

LPL1 (WN) reflects on her secondary school experience, highlighting a curriculum that heavily focused on grammar during English class: "I remember learning lots of grammar during English class time when I was in secondary schools." This narrative indicates a traditional, perhaps rigid, approach to language instruction that prioritised grammatical accuracy over practical language use. Norton's (2000) theory of imagined communities suggests that learners' investment in language learning is shaped by their perceived relevance of the language to their desired social contexts. For LPL1, the emphasis on grammar may have limited her engagement with English as a living, communicative tool, confining her use of the language to the classroom environment.

The lack of practical application of English outside the classroom can inhibit the formation of imagined communities that use English as a primary medium. This approach to language learning might have resulted in LPL1 viewing English as an academic subject rather than a tool for broader social interaction and community engagement. Consequently, her imagined communities are likely restricted to those where English is used in a formal, educational context, rather than in everyday life or professional settings.

As for LPL3 (WN), he provides a concise depiction of his linguistic environment: "...use Malay since young and only use English in English class..." This statement underscores a clear demarcation between the languages used in different social contexts. The dominance of Malay in LPL3's daily interactions suggests that English is perceived as a foreign language, relegated to the confines of the classroom. Norton's (2000) theory posits that the communities learners aspire to play a crucial role in their language learning motivation. For LPL3, the limited use of English outside the classroom indicates a lack of integration into imagined communities where English is the primary mode of communication.

This restricted exposure to English hinders the development of a robust imagined community that uses English regularly. The classroom, while important, provides a limited context for language use, lacking the richness and diversity of real-world interactions. Thus, LPL3's imagined communities are likely centred around academic settings, failing to extend to broader social or professional spheres where English could be more dynamically and practically utilised.

The insight from LPL5 (WN) describes the habitual use of Malay and the challenges in breaking this habit: "...Difficult to break habit because so used to speak Malay. I go everywhere people also use Malay, rarely use English..." This narrative highlights the strong influence of habitual language use and the societal norms that reinforce it. According to Norton's (2000) theory, investment in language learning is closely tied to the social identities and community learners aspire to join. For LPL5, the pervasive use of Malay in all social contexts creates a significant barrier to investing in English learning.

The social reinforcement of Malay as the dominant language in LPL5's environment limits his opportunities to practice and engage with English. This scenario illustrates how the lack of supportive social structures for using English can stifle the development of imagined communities where English is prevalent. Consequently, LPL5's imagined communities may not extend beyond those that predominantly use Malay, thereby limiting his motivation and investment in learning English.

Lastly, LPL10 (WN) shares her interest in English media but also her reluctance to use English in social interactions: "Love watching English movies... Practice speaking sometimes but don't use it when speak with friends because they will laugh at me." This narrative reveals a personal engagement with English through media, juxtaposed with a fear of social ridicule. Norton's (2000) theory suggests that learners' investment in language learning is influenced by their imagined identities within their desired communities. LPL10's engagement with English movies indicates an interest in global media communities, yet her fear of judgement from peers creates a significant barrier to practicing English in real-life interactions.

The disconnection between LPL10's private consumption of English media and her public use of the language reflects a gap in her imagined communities. While she may aspire to be part of global English-speaking communities, the lack of supportive peer networks hampers her ability to fully invest in English learning. This situation highlights the importance of a conducive social environment for language practice, without which learners like LPL10 struggle to bridge the gap between their private engagement with English and its practical, social use.

With the data presented by several low-proficiency users on the above, the theme "Limited Exposure and Usage" vividly illustrates the substantial barriers these learners face in integrating English into their daily lives. The data reveals a consistent pattern where the learners' primary language, Bahasa Malaysia, dominates their interactions, both at home and in social settings. This prevalence significantly limits their opportunities to practice and become proficient in English.

The narratives of LPL1, LPL3, LPL5, LPL9, and LPL10 highlight a crucial aspect of Norton's (2000) theory of imagined communities: the role of social environments in shaping language learning trajectories. For these learners, the lack of English use outside the classroom confines their imagined communities to academic settings, where English is viewed more as a subject to be studied than a tool for communication. This confinement restricts their ability to envision themselves as members of broader English-speaking communities, thereby diminishing their motivation and investment in language learning.

LPL1's recollection of a grammar-focused English class suggests a traditional and perhaps outdated approach to language education. This method fails to provide practical, real-world contexts for using English, which are crucial for developing fluency and confidence. The reliance on grammar instruction without opportunities for meaningful communication limits learners' engagement with the language, reinforcing the perception of English as an academic requirement rather than a living language.

The narratives of LPL3 and LPL5 further underscore the pervasive influence of societal norms and habitual language use. In environments where Bahasa Malaysia is the norm, the learners' attempts to use English are often met with limited success or encouragement. This scenario reflects a broader societal challenge, where the dominant language environment does not support or facilitate the practical use of English. Norton's (2000) framework emphasizes that investment in language learning is driven by the desire to join imagined communities. For these learners, the lack of a supportive

social environment for English use prevents them from fully investing in the language and limits their ability to envision themselves as proficient English speakers.

LPL9 and LPL10's experiences highlight the impact of peer dynamics and social judgement on language use. Even when learners have interest in English, as seen in LPL10's engagement with English movies, the fear of ridicule from peers can significantly hinder their willingness to practice the language. This fear of negative evaluation is a powerful deterrent, reflecting the social risks associated with using a second language in unsupportive environments. Norton's concept of investment includes the idea that learners' efforts are shaped by their expectations of social rewards and acceptance within their desired communities. For low-proficiency learners, the lack of positive reinforcement and the presence of social risks discourage their investment in English learning.

The data from the written narratives further supports these findings. LPL1's focus on grammar instruction, LPL3's habitual use of Malay, LPL5's challenge in breaking the habit of using Malay, and LPL10's selective use of English due to fear of ridicule all point to a broader issue of limited exposure and usage. These narratives emphasize the need for language learning environments that go beyond traditional classroom settings and provide real-world, practical opportunities for using English.

The low-proficiency learners' experiences emphasise the importance of creating supportive and immersive English-speaking environments. Educational institutions and policymakers must consider strategies that integrate English use into various aspects of learners' lives, promoting it as a functional and social language rather than merely an academic subject. This could involve more interactive and communicative teaching methods, extracurricular activities conducted in English, and creating peer support networks that encourage the use of English in safe and supportive contexts.

Moreover, addressing societal attitudes towards English use is crucial. Efforts to normalize English as a language of everyday communication, alongside Bahasa Malaysia, can help create more inclusive and supportive environments for learners. This approach aligns with Norton's (2000) assertion that language learning is deeply embedded in social contexts and that learners' investment is influenced by their ability to imagine themselves as legitimate members of the communities they aspire to join.

In conclusion, the theme "Limited Exposure and Usage" highlights the significant challenges faced by low-proficiency learners in integrating English into their lives. The data underscores the need for more supportive and immersive language learning environments that facilitate practical English use and help learners envision themselves as part of broader English-speaking communities. By addressing these challenges, we can better support low-proficiency learners in their language learning journeys and help them achieve their full potential as proficient English speakers.

Unsupportive Social and Peer

The theme of "Unsupportive Social and Peer Influence" among low-proficiency learners provides a stark contrast to the experiences of high-proficiency learners, highlighting how the lack of a supportive social environment can significantly impede language acquisition. In Norton's (2000) framework of imagined communities, the social contexts in which learners play a crucial role in shaping their motivation and investment in language learning. For low-proficiency learners, negative or unsupportive social and peer interactions act as substantial barriers, limiting their opportunities to practice and improve their English skills.

Social and peer influences are critical factors in language learning, as they can either encourage or hinder learners' efforts to use and practise a new language. In environments where peers and social networks predominantly use the first language, learners may feel discouraged or even stigmatized when attempting to use English. This lack of encouragement and reinforcement from their social circles can lead to decreased motivation and a lower likelihood of integrating English into their daily lives.

The data from low-proficiency learners reveal several instances where social and peer dynamics negatively impact their language learning experiences. These narratives shed light on how the absence of a supportive social framework can lead to feelings of isolation, inadequacy, and reluctance to engage in English communication:

LPL2 (IV): "...use Malay all the time. We don't use English to speak with each other and we don't use it at all."

LPL4 (IV): "... we use dialek Kelantan to speak with each other. There is no English use in our area."

LPL6 (IV): "I tried using English, but all of my friends speak Malay with me. Only coming to university I can actually use more English with other people."

LPL7 (IV): "I read and watch a lot of English movies and books, but I don't use it when talking because I don't have many friends that speak to me in English."

LPL9 (IV): "I only use English with some of my friends because they don't judge me and I am comfortable using English although my English is not that good."

LPL3 (IV): "Growing up, we don't use English at all. We use Malay to communicate all the time. My friends also speak Malay with me, except some of my Chinese and Indian friends."

Starting off with LPL2's account, which highlights a significant barrier in the form of unsupportive social and peer influences, which substantially limit the opportunities to use and practise English. This learner's statement, "...use Malay all the time. We don't use English to speak with each other and we don't use it at all," underscores the dominance of the first language (Malay) in daily interactions, both within peer groups and the broader social environment. This pervasive use of Malay creates a context where English is rarely, if ever, utilized, thereby reducing the chances for meaningful language practice and development.

Norton (2000) theorises that the social contexts in which language learners find themselves are crucial in determining their investment in learning a new language. In this case, LPL2's social environment does not support or encourage the use of English, which can lead to a lack of motivation and a diminished sense of purpose in learning the language. The consistent use of Malay among peers means that any attempt by LPL2 to practice English would be out of the ordinary, possibly leading to social discomfort or even ridicule.

The concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) by Lave and Wenger (1991) further elucidates this situation. In a supportive CoP, members engage in shared practices and mutual learning, fostering an environment conducive to skill development. However, LPL2's peer group functions as a CoP that reinforces the use of Malay, thereby excluding English from their shared practices. This exclusion hampers LPL2's ability to participate in meaningful English language activities within this community, effectively marginalizing the learner from potential English-speaking contexts.

In addition, the social dynamics described by LPL2 reflect a broader societal trend where English is not integrated into everyday communication, thus reducing its perceived value and utility. This scenario aligns with Norton's observation that learners' investment in a language is influenced by their ability to envision themselves as members of imagined communities where the language is spoken. For LPL2, the lack of such a vision within the immediate social context results in minimal investment in English language learning.

LPL4's statement, "...we use dialek Kelantan to speak with each other. There is no English use in our area," highlights the significant impact of regional language practices on English language learning. This account reveals that the dominant use of the local dialect (Kelantanese) in daily communication creates a substantial barrier to English language acquisition.

Norton (2000) emphasises that learners' investment in language learning is closely tied to their ability to envision themselves as members of communities where the target language is used. In LPL4's case, the pervasive use of the Kelantan dialect in their community limits their exposure to and practice of English, making it difficult to imagine themselves as part of an English-speaking community. This lack of exposure can diminish motivation and reduce the perceived relevance of learning English.

The concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) by Lave and Wenger (1991) is also pertinent here. A supportive CoP fosters shared learning and engagement in practices that enhance language skills. However, in LPL4's community, the CoP revolves around the Kelantanese dialect, effectively excluding English from daily practices. This exclusion limits opportunities for LPL4 to participate in English language activities and to develop proficiency through meaningful interaction.

Moreover, this situation reflects a broader societal pattern where regional languages or dialects dominate, overshadowing the use of English. This dynamic can lead to a lower perceived value of English and reduce opportunities for practice. Norton's theory suggests that such environments can significantly hinder learners' investment in English, as they are unable to see the language as relevant to their immediate social context.

Additionally, the lack of English use in LPL4's area can lead to a cycle of limited proficiency and low confidence. Without regular practice and exposure, learners may feel less confident in their English abilities, which in turn reduces their willingness to use the language even when opportunities arise. This cycle reinforces the dominance of the local dialect and further marginalises English in the learner's linguistic repertoire.

LPL6's statement, "I tried using English, but all of my friends speak Malay with me. Only coming to university I can actually use more English with other people," illustrates the significant impact of peer influence and social environments on language use and learning. This narrative sheds light on the challenges faced by learners in practising English in settings where Malay is the predominant language of communication.

Norton's (2000) theory highlights that language learners' investment in acquiring a new language is deeply influenced by their social interactions and the perceived value of the language within their communities. In LPL6's case, the dominance of Malay among their peers creates a social environment where English is not regularly used, which limits opportunities for practice and reduces the perceived necessity of English. This environment can lead to a lack of motivation and lower levels of investment in learning English.

From the perspective of Communities of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991), LPL6's peer group functions as a CoP that predominantly uses Malay for communication. This CoP, while supportive in many ways, does not facilitate English language practice, thereby creating a barrier to proficiency. It is only upon entering university, where the social environment and the CoPs are more diverse and possibly more inclusive of English, that LPL6 finds increased opportunities to use and practice English.

The transition to university represents a shift in social context and CoP for LPL6. At university, the presence of peers from different linguistic backgrounds and the academic requirement to use English create a more conducive environment for English practice. This change highlights the importance of creating supportive and diverse CoPs that encourage the use of English alongside other languages. Norton's theory suggests that such environments can significantly enhance learners' investment in English by providing more frequent and meaningful opportunities for practice.

Additionally, LPL6's experience reflects the broader societal patterns of language use in Malaysia, where Malay is the dominant language in many social settings. This dominance can create challenges for English learners, as they may struggle to find contexts where English is valued and used regularly. Educational institutions, therefore, play a crucial role in providing these contexts and fostering environments that promote bilingualism or multilingualism.

LPL7's statement highlights the disconnect between passive and active use of English, shaped significantly by social interactions. While LPL7 engages with English through media, the lack of English-speaking friends hinders active practice, which is crucial for language acquisition.

Norton's (2000) theory posits that the social value of language within learners' communities influences their investment in learning. For LPL7, English is valued for personal enjoyment and educational purposes but not as a means of social communication. This creates a gap where the learner is proficient in understanding and consuming English content but lacks the opportunity to use it in conversation, affecting overall proficiency and confidence.

The concept of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983; Norton, 2001) is also relevant here. LPL7 likely envisions belonging to global English-speaking communities through media consumption. However, the absence of a tangible, immediate community of English speakers limits this vision's realization. This discrepancy between imagined and actual communities can result in a

lower motivation to practice speaking English, despite a strong passive engagement with the language.

From the perspective of Communities of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991), LPL7's engagement with English movies and books places her on the periphery of an English-speaking CoP. From transition to full participation, active interaction and communication are necessary. However, without English-speaking peers, LPL7 remains a peripheral participant, consuming content but not engaging in the shared practices of conversation and communication that define a CoP.

This narrative also reflects a broader issue within language learning contexts: the separation between academic or personal language use and social language use. Educational systems often emphasize reading and listening skills, sometimes at the expense of speaking and writing. LPL7's experience suggests a need for more integrated language learning approaches that encourage active use of English in social settings, beyond media consumption.

Moreover, LPL7's reliance on English media points to the role of technology and digital resources in language learning. While these resources are valuable, they must be complemented by opportunities for social interaction in the target language. The digital age provides abundant passive learning resources, but these need to be leveraged to create active, interactive learning experiences.

LPL9's statement, "I only use English with some of my friends because they don't judge me and I am comfortable using English although my English is not that good," underscores the significance of supportive social environments in language learning. LPL9 highlights how the presence of non-judgmental friends creates a safe space for practicing English, even if proficiency is not high.

Norton's (2000) theory of investment in language learning suggests that learners are more likely to invest in language practices when they feel accepted and supported. For LPL9, the comfort and lack of judgment from certain friends provide a crucial motivational boost, encouraging him to use English despite his perceived shortcomings. This support system plays a pivotal role in his willingness to engage in language learning actively.

The concept of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983; Norton, 2001) also applies here. LPL9 envisions a community where English is the medium of communication and participation is welcomed irrespective of proficiency levels. This imagined community, realized through the supportive friends he mentions, fuels his desire to practice and improve his English. The positive reinforcement from these friends aligns with his vision of becoming a competent English speaker, thereby reinforcing his investment in learning the language.

From the perspective of Communities of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991), LPL9's friends who do not judge his English create a mini-CoP where mutual respect and support are core values. This environment allows him to transit from peripheral to more active participation within this group, fostering his language development. In a CoP, learning occurs through participation in shared activities; for LPL9, this includes conversations in English, which are essential for developing fluency and confidence.

LPL9's narrative also highlights the impact of social anxiety on language learning. The fear of judgment can significantly hinder learners from practising a new language, leading to limited opportunities for improvement. In LPL9's case, the absence of such fear within his supportive circle enables him to overcome this barrier, illustrating the importance of emotional and psychological safety in the learning process. This account also reflects broader socio-cultural dynamics where the stigma or embarrassment associated with language errors can deter learners from practicing. By contrast, environments that foster acceptance and encouragement can dramatically enhance learners' willingness to engage and improve. LPL9's experience shows how crucial it is for language learning contexts to cultivate supportive, non-judgmental atmospheres that encourage practice and growth.

LPL3 reflects on his upbringing with, "Growing up, we don't use English at all. We use Malay to communicate all the time. My friends also speak Malay with me, except some of my Chinese and Indian friends." This narrative highlights the overwhelming dominance of Malay in his daily interactions and its implications for his English language learning journey.

The frequent use of Malay in LPL3's family and community has clearly shaped his linguistic habits and limited his exposure to English. This environment offers little incentive for him to practice or improve his English skills, as his primary means of communication and social engagement revolve

around Malays. The lack of necessity to use English in his immediate surroundings significantly diminishes his motivation to invest in learning the language.

In exploring LPL3's situation, it is evident that his imagined communities are firmly rooted in Malay-speaking contexts. Unlike high-proficiency learners who envision themselves participating in global or professional English-speaking environments, LPL3's vision does not extend beyond his Malay-speaking community. This limited scope influences his language learning priorities and reduces his inclination to engage with English. The concept of imagined communities (Anderson, 1983) here is crucial, as it helps explain why LPL3 does not perceive English as a valuable skill for his future aspirations.

Furthermore, the social fabric of LPL3's environment supports the use of Malay over English. His friends and family predominantly communicate in Malay, reinforcing his use of the language. This social reinforcement creates a cycle that perpetuates his reliance on Malay and marginalizes English. Within his community, English remains a peripheral language, used sparingly and only when necessary. This scenario is indicative of the dynamics described in Communities of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where the shared practices and norms of a community dictate language use.

Additionally, the sporadic use of English with his Chinese and Indian friends highlights a missed opportunity for broader language practice. These interactions, though valuable, are insufficient to counterbalance the overwhelming use of Malay in his daily life. The limited and inconsistent use of English in such interactions underscores the challenges faced by learners like LPL3, who lack a supportive environment to practice and improve their language skills.

The analysis of the interview data for low-proficiency learners has highlighted the significant impact of unsupportive social and peer influence on their language learning experiences. To further substantiate these findings, written narrative data from the participants were examined. The written narratives offer additional insights into how the social environments and peer interactions of low-proficiency learners shape their engagement with English. These narratives provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and barriers faced by these learners in their efforts to improve their English proficiency. The following sections present the written narrative data, shedding light on the role of social and peer influence in the language learning journeys of low-proficiency learners:

LP2 (WN): "...only speak English when asked and sometimes I worry that people will laugh at my bad English"

LP7 (WN): "I did try to talk with my friends in English but they feel weird why I speak English with them... some help and speak English with me, but not all the time."

LP3 (WN): "After coming to uni, I can use more English, but my close friends rarely use English with me because we use Malay all the time."

LP2's written narrative reveals a pervasive sense of self-consciousness about using English in social interactions. The concern about being laughed at for poor English proficiency is a significant barrier to active language use. Norton (2000) suggests that the imagined identities and communities learners aspire to join are critical in shaping their language learning journey. For LP2, the fear of negative judgment from peers inhibits the formation of a positive imagined community where English is a medium of communication. This anxiety about social perception can discourage active participation in English-speaking environments, ultimately hindering language development.

The reluctance to use English due to fear of ridicule reflects a broader issue of social support and acceptance within the community of practice (CoP). Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning is deeply embedded in social interactions and community engagement. In LP2's case, the lack of a supportive CoP for practicing English underscores the importance of a nurturing environment where learners feel safe to make mistakes and improve. Without such support, learners like LP2 may struggle to invest fully in language learning, as their efforts are overshadowed by the fear of social repercussions.

Next, LP7's insight highlights a mixed experience with peer support in using English. While some friends respond positively to efforts to converse in English, others react with confusion or reluctance. This inconsistent support can create an environment where practicing English is seen as

unusual or unnecessary, further isolating the learner from potential English-speaking opportunities. Norton's (1997) theory emphasizes that investment in language learning is influenced by the desire to join and to be accepted in specific social groups. For LP7, the sporadic encouragement from friends may not be sufficient to sustain a robust investment in learning English, as the imagined community of English speakers remains fragmented and unreliable.

The occasional support LP7 receives from peers aligns with the concept of "legitimate peripheral participation" in CoP theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This concept suggests that learners gradually move from peripheral to more central participation in a community as they gain competence and confidence. However, the inconsistency in peer support for LP7 hinders this progression, leaving the learner in a liminal space where English practice is not fully integrated into daily interactions. The need for a consistent and encouraging social environment is crucial for learners to feel legitimate in their use of English and to progress towards greater proficiency.

Lastly, LP3's experience underscores the ongoing challenge of transitioning to an English-speaking environment in university while maintaining close ties with peers who prefer using Malay. The persistence of using Malay with close friends indicates a strong influence of pre-existing social habits and language preferences. Norton's (2001) concept of imagined communities suggests that learners envision themselves as part of social groups that use the target language. For LP3, the imagined community of English speakers in university is juxtaposed with the entrenched community of Malay-speaking friends, creating a conflict between aspirations and reality.

The difficulty in shifting language use within established social circles highlights the importance of creating new communities of practice that align with language learning goals. As Lave and Wenger (1991) note, communities of practice are dynamic and can evolve with the introduction of new members and practices. For LP3, finding or forming new social networks within the university that prioritize English use could facilitate greater engagement with the language. This approach would help bridge the gap between the learner's current linguistic environment and the imagined community of proficient English speakers, supporting a more sustained and meaningful investment in language learning.

The theme of "Unsupportive Social and Peer Influence" reveals how the social environment and peer dynamics can significantly affect the language learning journey of low-proficiency learners. Norton's (2000) theory of imagined communities emphasises that learners' investment in language learning is profoundly influenced by their desire to integrate into specific social groups. However, for low-proficiency learners, the absence of a supportive social framework often impedes this process, creating substantial barriers to their language acquisition efforts.

The narratives from low-proficiency learners consistently highlight how their social environments do not foster or encourage the use of English. For example, LPL2 and LPL4's accounts show how the prevalent use of Malay and local dialects within their communities diminishes the necessity and value of practising English. These ingrained linguistic habits discourage learners from using English, as it is not perceived as a crucial skill in their immediate social contexts.

The experiences shared by LPL6 and LPL7 further illustrate the challenges these learners face when attempting to practise English within unsupportive social settings. Despite their personal efforts to improve their language skills, they encounter resistance from peers who prefer to communicate in Malay. This lack of support can lead to feelings of frustration and isolation, making it difficult for learners to find meaningful opportunities to use and enhance their English. Norton's concept of investment highlights the importance of a supportive social network, where learners can see the tangible benefits and purpose of their language learning efforts. In the absence of such support, maintaining motivation and commitment becomes a significant challenge.

The narratives of LPL9 and LPL3 bring to light the impact of peer judgement and the fear of ridicule associated with using English. These learners' stories reflect broader societal attitudes that often link language proficiency with social status and identity. The fear of being judged negatively discourages learners from practising their English, which is essential for language development. This situation aligns with the concept of "legitimate peripheral participation" in Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where learners need a supportive environment to transition from peripheral participation to more central roles within a community.

The written narratives offer additional insights into the complexities of social and peer influences on language learning. LP2 and LP7's experiences show the mixed reactions they receive

from peers when they attempt to use English. The inconsistency in peer support creates a disjointed learning environment where the practice of English is not seen as a collective effort. LP3's account of continuing to use Malay with close friends, despite being in an English-speaking university setting, underscores the difficulty of breaking away from established linguistic norms and habits.

The theme of unsupportive social and peer influence underscores the crucial role of social networks in language learning. For low-proficiency learners, the lack of a supportive and encouraging environment can significantly hinder their progress and investment in learning English.

Conclusion

The findings from this study reveal that low-proficiency learners face significant challenges in their English language learning due to limited exposure and usage, and unsupportive social and peer influences. These barriers are deeply rooted in the learners' immediate social environments, where the predominant use of Bahasa Malaysia and local dialects significantly limits opportunities to practice and use English. The dominance of these languages within learners' communities and peer groups not only hinders their language development but also affects their motivation and investment in learning English. Norton's (2000) theory of imagined communities and the Communities of Practice (CoP) framework by Lave and Wenger (1991) provide valuable insights into how these social contexts shape language learning trajectories. The lack of supportive environments that encourage the use of English restricts learners from envisioning themselves as members of English-speaking communities, thereby diminishing their motivation and investment in language learning.

Suggestion for Future Research

Future research could explore strategies for enhancing low-proficiency learners' exposure to English outside the classroom. Investigating the role of digital platforms and social media in fostering imagined communities could provide insights into new avenues for language practice. Additionally, longitudinal studies could track the development of learners' imagined communities and their impact on language proficiency over time. Researchers could also examine the effectiveness of peer support networks and community-based programs in creating supportive environments for language learning. Finally, cross-cultural studies could compare the experiences of low-proficiency learners in different regions to identify universal challenges and effective strategies for overcoming them.

Co-Author Contribution

The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 carried out the data collection and conducted analyses of the data, as well as the discussion of the findings. Author 2 provided critical feedback on the analysis and improvements towards the discussions. Author 3 provided the conclusions of the findings and was responsible for the write-up for submission of the final manuscript.

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