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A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF FEMALE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigated the underachieving female learners' perceptions regarding their English as a Second Language (ESL) learning at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. It examined the views that these language learners held of their language acquisition and learning experiences as related to sociocultural influences, formal instruction and language education policy. A naturalistic approach was utilized during the investigation. The data were gathered through conducting in-depth interviews, making observations, reviewing relevant documents, and utilizing other supplementary techniques. The researcher used Strauss and Corbin's (1990) coding paradigm (i.e. open coding and axial coding) to analyze the data. The results of this investigation revealed that several variables impacted the female students' underachievement. Among the findings were negative peers' reaction and behaviour, community's influence, unsuitable lesson time, large class size, and unclear as well as unjustifiable policy.

Keywords: English as a second language (ESL), language acquisition, underachievement

INTRODUCTION

English language education is an important component in the education system of Malaysia. It can be said that Malaysia is in the midst of a controversial debate with respect to the positions of the English language and the Malay language. When Malaysia was under the British occupation, the English language had a strong influence on Malaysian sociolinguistic patterns. However, after Malaysia obtained independence in 1957, its relative importance was altered significantly. This country experienced a decline in the use and standard of English. The status of the Malay language was upgraded and is now the country's official and national language. Currently, it is being used as a medium of instruction in most schools and universities. Still, English remains an important language because of its position as an international and global language (Crystal, 1997; Pennycook, 1994), albeit in a clearly secondary role in Malaysia.

Although English is a compulsory subject in schools, it is however, not compulsory to pass English. Due to this, students are not learning sufficient English and are not taking the learning of English seriously (Awang, 1994). Despite being exposed to English for more than ten years, university students lack the linguistic competence to facilitate the reading of English referenced materials (Anie, 1982; Asmah, 1987; Awang, 1994). Malaysian university students need to be proficient in English because many of the library materials are in English (Asmah, 1987). Students must be able to read these texts in English, but present in writing their academic papers in Malay. It is mandatory for most Malaysian universities that students pass a series of English as a Second Language (ESL) courses before the award of the degree. Besides, it is the policy of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia that in the computation of students' cumulative general point average (CGPA), ESL grades are taken into account. This has led to a tension between students and the university; some of these English language learners argue that they do not receive fair treatment because they may excel in other academic courses conducted in Malay but obtain poor English grades. This will lead to a drop in their CGPA and thus academic underachievement is the outcome. Solutions that can address the tension between the student and the university system are required so that a more democratic system of education can be promoted.

Studies on ESL learners' perceptions of their underachievement in the Malaysian universities have not been rigorously conducted and are relatively few. In the world today, most second language investigations focus on average learners; a study on understanding learners who struggle is needed (Ehrman, 1996). Besides, Au (1993) believes that eliciting students' perception is revealing, since perception gives information about learners' world and immediate surroundings. As for O'Shaughnessy (1992), he believes that "perception is an experience" (p. 226) that assists and provides physical actions. Thus, learners' perceptions are learners' experiences that impact their actions and behavior. Crane (1992) argues that "perceptions are just beliefs acquired in a certain way" (p. 150). Beliefs are personally-held perceptions about the way one learns and does things and thus guide one's daily lives (Lester 1990).

A qualitative research of learners' perceptions would enable the researcher to gain access into the learners' worldview and reality, as well as how they interpret their learning experiences. The learners are the insiders who can articulate in detail their daily lives since they have vivid knowledge about their learning problems and difficulties. Being in existence of underachievement, the learners can express their thoughts, feelings and opinions like "specialists." The learners are powerful key informants and, apparently their perspectives can contribute immensely to the insight of learning failure. Investigating on students' perceptions can bring about an element of empowerment; in addition, according to Au (1993) without learners' input, learning tends to perpetuate less productive and old patterns, and this can prevent the emergence of new patterns of instruction.

The main purpose of this investigation is to examine the female ESL underachievers' perceptions with respect to their English language learning experiences at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. This study further attempts to explore, from the perspectives of the underachievers, the factors that prevent them from excelling in the English language, and which in turn affect their academic achievement. This research addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the underachieving female learners' perceptions of the sociocultural factors that influence the learning of the English language?; (2) What are the underachieving female learners' perceptions of the formal English language instruction at the university?; and (3) What are the underachieving female learners' perceptions of the University's language policy with respect to the English language requirement?

Theoretical Perspectives and Review of Related Literature. Even though there is a considerable body of research that addresses the issues of success and failure of learning and acquiring another language, ESL studies of university underachievers in the Malaysian context is still lacking in quantity. This section presents the theoretical perspectives of second language acquisition and learning, and the research findings on variables affecting the acquisition and learning of another language namely sociocultural influences, formal instruction and language policy.

The theoretical perspectives discussed in this segment are Ellis (1990) and Spolsky's (1989) frameworks, Lambert (1974) and Gardner's (1983, 1985) socio-psychological theories, Krashen's (1982, 1985) theory of second language acquisition and Schumann's acculturation model (1978). Ellis (1990) points out five factors that impact second language acquisition and learning; they are situational factors, linguistic input, learner differences, learner processes and linguistic output. In addition, Spolsky (1989) suggests seventy-four conditions for second language acquisition: one instance is, second language learning occurs in a social context that can influence attitudes and motivation that in turn interact with individual characteristics and learning opportunities; and another instance is, individual differences join with social context whereby the learner makes use of second language learning opportunities to achieve linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. On the other hand, there is Lambert's (1974) socio-psychological model; this model begins with aptitude and attitude which affect motivation (e.g. integrative and instrumental) to produce bilingual proficiency; being bilingual has effects on self-concept, and the alternative outcomes could be subtractive or additive bilingualism. Related to Lambert's model is Gardner's socio-educational model (1983, 1985), which is pedagogic in nature; this model offers four stages: the first stage is the social and cultural context; the second stage is the individual differences such as intelligence, language aptitude, motivation and situational anxiety; the third stage is the formal language learning and informal language experience; and the fourth stage is the outcomes of bilingual proficiency and the non-linguistic outcomes. There is another model that stresses on the element of culture known as an acculturation model proposed by Schumann (1978), in which the essential point is that the second language learners undergo adaptation to the new culture. Nevertheless, Krashen's monitor model (1982, 1985) has a different focus; it claims that humans acquire language by receiving comprehensible input that is a little beyond the learners' current level of competence.

Several investigations have been conducted on the variables that impact second language learning and acquisition. In the aspect of sociocultural elements, the three areas that have become the focus of previous investigations were peers', teachers' and community's influences. One of the research findings of Segalowitz and Gathbonton (1977) revealed that subjects with good English language proficiency were viewed as undesirable by their own language community. Elías-Olivares (1976) reported that subjects were made fun of by their peers when they tried to use standard Spanish. In Brophy and Good's (1974) research, it was found that teachers have differential expectations on the performance of students of different characteristics.

English language instruction in a formal setting is another variable that affects second language performance and achievement. Research conducted by Chinhara and Oller (1978) and Krashen, Jones, Zelinski and Usprich (1978) revealed faster development in learners after receiving formal instruction. Nevertheless, Fathman (1975) and Kadia (1989) discovered that formal instruction did not help. In addition, Shresta (1998) found that individuals who received formal instruction committed less grammatical errors than those who received informal exposure; while Spada (1987) suggested that both form-focused and meaning-focused instruction work best for learners. Apart from this, Shepherd (1990), Haggan (1990), and Heath and Branscombe (1985) revealed the benefits of activities such as video watching, newspaper activity, and letter writing. In the aspect of class size, Shamim's (1996) finding showed that large class size posed several problems and obstacles, but Mackey (1995) indicated that class size of thirty students did not pose major difficulties

It has been pointed out by Tollefson (1981) that language education policy can influence second language acquisition and learning. Singapore, Tanzania and Ukraine are examples of countries in which the impact of language policy can be seen. Even though Singapore has four official languages, it has "officially adopted English as the working language" (Lim, 1991, p. 83). English dominates in language use and it is the medium of instruction in all schools and institutions of higher learning (Lim, 1991). English is becoming something between a first and a second language for a large part of Singapore's population (Pakir, 1993). It is thus not surprising that the Singaporeans exhibit better command of English than the Malaysians. As for Tanzania, the decline in the standard of English in the educational system was attributed to the shift in the status of English from a second to a foreign language (Rubagumya, 1990). Tarnopolsky (1996) indicates that, in Ukraine, despite the authorities' emphasis and attention to English and also in spite of students' several years of exposure to English learning, the language achievement of many learners is still very poor and thus does not reach the expectation.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

This case study, which used a naturalistic approach, is a preliminary research that investigated the ESL learning of underachieving students who took ESL courses conducted by the former Faculty of Language Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Three female key informants were selected by purposive sampling based on several criteria. The key informants: (a) must be enrolled in the English program; (b) must be undergraduates who are majoring in either physical science, computer, social science, Islamic studies, journalism, psychology, economics, engineering, technology or business; (c) must be the students who are required to take and pass English courses; (d) must either be the second or third year students who have attempted at least two English courses and whose grades have had an impact on their CGPA; (e) must show evidences of underachievement as represented by low English grades of C, D, E or F at the university level; and (f) are not fluent and proficient in English from observations provided by lecturers who can also provide information on students' ability via their records, test results and assignments.

The investigator employed triangulation, which means utilizing a number of data collection methods in the data collection process. One of them was by conducting in-depth interviews based on an interview guide that covered aspects on sociocultural influences, formal English language instruction and language education policy. The interview guide adhered to a semi-structured interview format. It was developed according to the relevant literature and the questions were based on the work of researchers such as Gardner (1985), Gardner and Tremblay (1994), Ellis (1994) and Judd (1992). The interview responses were audiotaped and transcribed. The researcher also made observations in which special attention was focused on the physical setting, and the female informants' physical and behavioral characteristics. The documents that were reviewed were the female learners' academic results, the academic program, and the language program. This researcher also took down field notes from the observations made and the interview responses obtained. Engaging in writing reflexive journal is another method employed; the purpose is be involved in bracketing, and thus this would avoid from going into the setting with preconceived ideas that would reduce objectivity. Photography is also another method utilized; this is to get a more realistic picture of the setting. The data were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) coding paradigm: (i) open coding is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data, and (ii) axial coding is the process of making connections between categories so that subcategories can be identified.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the three research questions of the study, which cover sociocultural influences, formal English language instruction and language education policy. A brief discussion on the connection of the data to relevant research literature is also addressed within the results. The implications of the findings to Malaysian educational context is also included.

Research Question One. The answers to the first research question “What are the underachieving female learners’ perceptions of the sociocultural factors that influence the learning of the English language?” are: (i) negative peers’ reaction, (ii) lecturers’ judgment, and (iii) community’s rejection. The female underachievers perceived their peers’ reaction and behavior towards their use of English as negative. Their peers jeered, teased, ridiculed and criticized them when they tried to practice communicating in English. This is similar to the result obtained by Elias-Olivares (1976) who discovered that students were made fun of when they tried to utilize a standard language. The learners also reported that the ESL lecturers judged students based on their characteristics such as ethnic groups and urban/rural element; and this affected their language learning. This is consistent with the finding obtained by Brophy and Good (1974) who found that teachers had differential expectations on the performance of students of different characteristics. It was also found that the university’s community, in particular the non-proficient English speakers, exhibited negative attitude and rejection towards the use of English. They felt offended and uneasy when English was spoken to them and they did not perceive the proficient English speakers as desirable. Similar result was found by Segalowitz and Gatbonton (1977) which indicated that subjects who were proficient in English were viewed as undesirable by their own language community.

Research Question Two. The answers to the second research question “What are the underachieving female learners’ perceptions of the formal English language instruction at the university?” are: (i) ineffective instruction, (ii) unfavorable classroom setting, (iii) unsuitable learning hours, and (iv) large class size. The female acquirers perceived these factors as contributing to their underachievement. The instructional practices were ineffective because the lecturers’ approach was more of the transmission model and they were too textbook-oriented. Furthermore, they employed more form-focused instruction than meaning-focused instruction. This is ineffective because as suggested by Spada (1987), both form-focused and meaning-focused instructions are required, as these would work best for learners. Further, there was also lack of English language exposure for the female learners. Besides, the lecturers did not utilize adequate aids and activities that could benefit students as found by Shepherd (1990), Haggan (1990), and Heath and Branscombe (1985). It was discovered that the university classrooms were not favorable and not adequately equipped with teaching aids. In addition, the learning hours were not suitable because classes were mostly held in the afternoon and evening. Large class size was also perceived by the key informants as affecting their ESL achievement because this reduced classroom participation and effective discussion. This is consistent with Shamim’s (1996) report which indicated that large class size posed several difficulties, problems and obstacles.

Research Question Three. The answers to the third research question “What are the underachieving female learners’ perceptions of the University’s language policy with respect to the English language requirement?” are: (i) unclear policy, (ii) unjustifiable policy, (iii) undesirable policy, and (iv) ineffective policy. The underachievers were not clear of the direction that the country and university were moving in terms of language use. At one point, it seemed that the Malay language was to be respected as the national and official language, and it was to supersede English in terms of status. On the other hand, there was also an emphasis on English as a language of importance to the extent that it was compulsory for the students to pass English; therefore seemingly considering English as a dominant language at the university level. Since it was not clear, the ESL requirement was perceived by the informants as being ineffective. This is because many of the students exhibited incompetence in English language use even though they had passed the English courses. The university’s policy of the ESL requirement was also considered unfair and undesirable because the informants’ CGPA and academic achievement were adversely affected and therefore placing them in an academic risk situation. Kerr (1976) cited in Reagan (1991) suggests four tests to evaluate language policies: desirability test, justness test, effectiveness test and tolerability test. From the findings of this research, the policy had not satisfied all the four tests. It should be noted that the Malaysian school situation is somewhat similar to that of Ukraine because in spite of so many years of English language study, majority of the students in these two countries exhibit low proficiency and poor performance in the English language.

The results of this study revealed several variables as having influence on the English language acquisition and learning of the female underachievers. The dynamics of the constellation of these variables such as negative peers' reaction, lecturers' judgment, community's rejection, ineffective instruction, unfavorable classroom setting, unsuitable learning hours, large class size, and unclear, unjustifiable, undesirable and ineffective policy interacted and blended with one another, and thus resulting in ESL underachievement and academic underachievement.

Implications. Educationists, applied linguists and researchers should not focus only on a single variable when investigating on second language learning difficulties. They should also take into consideration the possibilities of other variables of second language acquisition and learning that can impact learners' language proficiency. The implementation toward improvement in second language learning should be a concerted effort of all relevant authorities. For instance, the university should openly adopt a policy of bilingualism. Another instance is, an intensive English language learning program should be designed to cater the needs of students with low English language proficiency. In addition, the lecturers should be equipped with the latest knowledge of second language acquisition and learning in terms of theory and practice. More studies conducted based on learners' voices, perceptions, and perceptions of experiences are essential as this would not only lead to empowerment but also to the utilization and application of the latest and effective teaching materials and methodology. Attractive awards and grants should be extended to investigators and educators for such research endeavor. The findings from these studies could then provide justifications for a change and an advancement in the Malaysian education system, and hence meeting the needs of learners in an English "information technology" era.

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