

Opportunities for English Language Learning of International Students in Malaysia

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Introduction

Malaysia aspires to be the hub of education regionally (Kerr, 2011) and also internationally (Model for Success, 2008). Thus, Malaysia strives to recruit 200,000 international students (ISs henceforth) by year 2020 (Chi, 2011). The 2010 statistics indicate that there were 86,923 foreigners registered as ISs in public and private higher education institutions in Malaysia in 2010 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). Public universities, especially the five research universities – Universiti Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, and Universiti Putra Malaysia have been enrolling more ISs in their establishment as this increases their world ranking (Tham & Kam, 2008). Having more ISs in the education landscape in Malaysia would mean that there is a need for a common language for interaction especially in the academic sector. In this case, English is the lingua franca as it is widely used as the “language of international communication and trade, science and technology, and as the vehicle for the acquisition of knowledge” (Zuraidah Mohd. Don, 2012:2). Although not an English-speaking country, Malaysia, like other receiving countries, puts emphasis on English as it is the language to be used in the academic milieu. Furthermore, Yusliza Mohd. Yusoff and Chelliah (2010) propose proficiency in the English language as one of the seven variables that can predict the adaptation level of ISs in Malaysia. Thus, reporting one part of the findings from a larger study, this article looks at opportunities in learning and using the English language reported by nine ISs studying at a public university in Malaysia.

Literature Review

A lot of the literature on ISs in Malaysia deals with ISs' factors for choosing institutions in Malaysia as a place of study, [e.g., Zainurin Dahari and Muhammad Abduh (2011), Mohd Taib Hj. Dora et al. (2009), Rohana Jani et al. (2009), and Rohaizat Baharun et al. (2011)]. Very few studies have examined the problems related to English language among ISs. Four of them are presented below.

Firstly, Zuria Mahmud, Saleh Amat, Saemah Rahman and Noriah Mohd Ishak (2010) conducted five focus group interviews involving 30 ISs from three universities. The issue was on their acculturation in Malaysia. The findings show that they faced three big problems – climate, culture, including the use of English, and care. The respondents highlighted that Malaysians

speak English with a Malay accent and there is a lack of English usage on signage and documents. Similarly, respondents in Manjula and Slethaug's (2011) study found English to be a problem. In fact, they chose English language usage as the second most challenging matter among the eight challenges that they faced. The respondents for the study consisted of 78 ISs originating from 17 countries studying at a university in Malaysia.

Mohd Zaki Mohd Amin (2011) conducted a needs analysis on 40 ISs in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia asking about the problematic skills in English. The respondents ranked speaking as the most problematic skill followed by writing, reading, vocabulary and grammar, and lastly listening. On the other hand, Marlyna Maros, Siti Hanim Stapa, and Mohamad Subakir Mohd Yasin (2012) administered a survey on 171 ISs and discovered that the most crucial language skills needed are listening and speaking. 'Speaking' is in line with Mohd Zaki Mohd Amin's (2011) finding, but 'listening' is contradictory because in his finding, 'listening' is the least problematic skill. However, this might be due to the nature of the instrument used and respondents recruited. Both studies utilised different instruments and focused on different sets of respondents.

Although with mixed results on the problematic skills in English; it can be surmised that, all in all, English is firstly, a very important factor for ISs; and secondly, it has posed a lot of challenges for them. Thus, this article also deliberates on the issue of English as a challenge but it takes a more optimistic stand by focusing on the opportunities for English language learning of ISs in Malaysia.

Objective and Research Question

As mentioned, this article highlights one part of the findings from a bigger study that looks into the English language learning experiences (ELLEs) of international students in Malaysia. Thus, the objective of this article is to report on the opportunities for English language learning among international students (ISs) in Malaysia. The relevant research question is: *What are the kinds of opportunities for English language learning experienced by international students in Malaysia?*

Method

In order to gather information on students' experiences, a suitable approach is through a qualitative lens.

Data were gathered through document analysis and interviews. The primary data provider was the online postings on Google+ (document analysis). The information was triangulated in the two rounds of the interview with the participants. Data were analysed using the six-step thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) and managed by ATLAS.ti.

Participants

There were nine international students involved. Their pseudonyms are Shamsulwahab (Iraq, PhD), Fatinmalik (Iraq, PhD), Faizal (Iraq, Master’s (M)), Basri (Algeria, PhD), Mohsin (Iran, M), Fairus (Libya, M), Nabil (Bahrain, M), Faizah (Indonesia, PhD), and Imran (Palestine, M). Their ages ranged from 22 to 39 years old. Two of them stayed on campus while the rest lived in Kajang, Serdang and Gombak. Almost all have been in Malaysia a year or less except for Basri who has been here for eight years. At the time of the study, they were undergoing an English Language Proficiency course at a public university in Malaysia.

Findings and Discussions

The data revealed that opportunities for English language learning for international students could be divided into two categories. They are seizing and missing opportunities referring to the chances they could find, and the chances that they did not get, respectively, to practise and use English. This is as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1 is a network view – an output from ATLAS.ti. It displays the two categories of opportunities – Seizing and Missing opportunities. The former category is related to the successes whereas the latter is linked to the challenges in the ISs’ English language learning experiences (ELLEs). It can be seen that there are more varieties in the missed opportunities as compared to

the seized opportunities. However, there were 74 and 70 reported incidents for both seized opportunities and missed opportunities respectively.

Seizing Opportunities – Success

Participants associated practising and using English as evidence of success. They seized opportunities when they managed to practise and also accomplished tasks. For the former, they were able to practise using English either overall or based on specific skills like reading, speaking or writing. For the latter, the tasks accomplished can either be related to academic or non-academic tasks. Figure 2 summarises the opportunities seized.

In seizing the opportunities as seen in Figure 2, Nabil reported on having an overall practice of *“us[ing] language in the markets and street and trying developed through follow the news and watch movies”* (Nabil, interview_2). However, he relayed a more specific activity in his first interview about writing messages *“sometimes every day I send message in English”* (Nabil, interview_1). Besides feeling successful in practising writing, there were other skills like reading and speaking that had been reported by Mohsin and Faizal. Mohsin announced that he had started reading news in English. He wrote *“I start reading [E]nglish news...”* (Mohsin, online posting). In addition, Faizal practised his speaking when he assisted someone to find his/her way. He reported:

He ask [I do not know the way how I go out from the university] so I help him and show him the road and make the driver of bus help him. So I think I’m better in English week after week.
(Faizal, online posting)

Another aspect that stirs the feeling of success in the ELLEs among the participants is when they were able

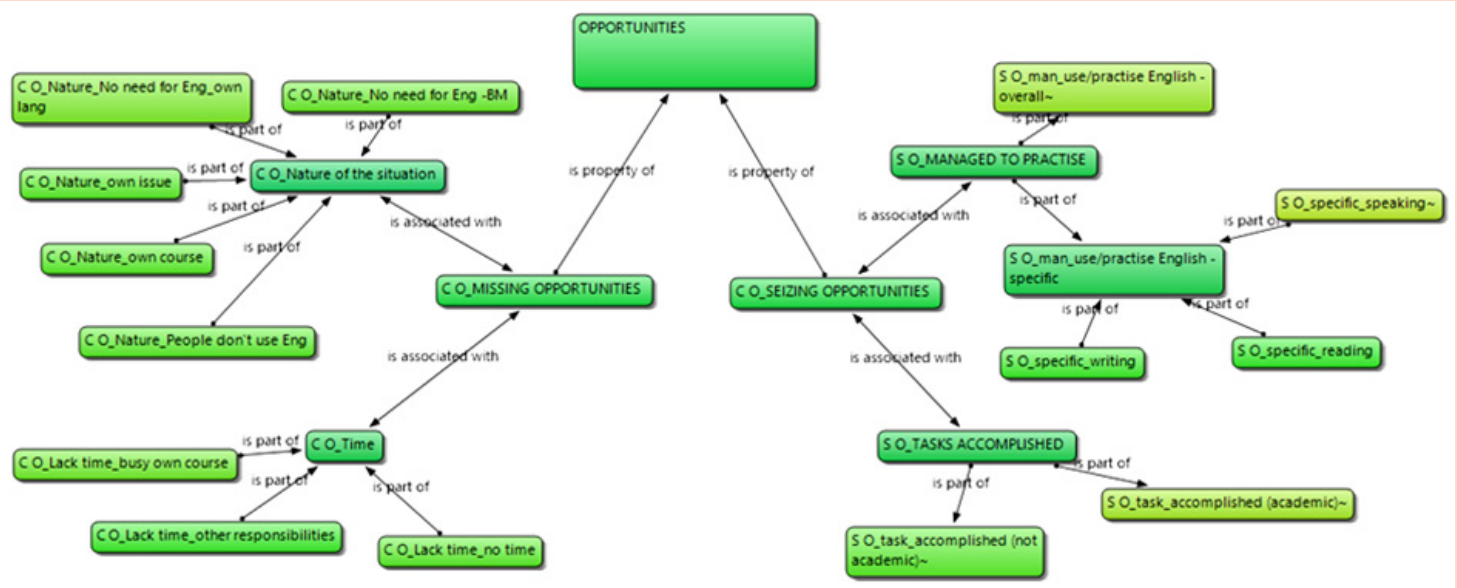


FIGURE 1 Two categories of opportunities



FIGURE 2 Seizing opportunities

to accomplish a task – be it academic or non-academic. For the former, Shamsulwahab talked about his experience in doing a presentation in English for his research methodology class. It is seen in the exchanges between the researcher and the participant below:

Participant: End of research methodology. Each student from each department do the presentation about his or them err...research proposal. What you do in your research. At the end of this research methodology. Therefore, there are 2 or 3 from ... staff department, professors and any student, each student and come

Researcher: Using powerpoint?

Participant: Yeah. And give what you research. What you do in your research.

Researcher: You presented in English?

Participant: Yeah. What is the idea in your research. Then the student start to explain his or her research.
(Shamsulwahab, interview_2)

As for the examples of the non-academic accomplishment, Nabil relayed his encounters in handling his problem with the bank and making a report about a stolen laptop at the police station and that he proudly declared that he “*explained to them the situation and what happened and, of course, we are speaking in English*” (Nabil, online posting).

To sum up, the participants seized opportunities to practise English. They either used English in general or they practised according to skills. Furthermore, they also took the opportunities to practise using the English language by accomplishing tasks, both academic and non-academic.

Missing opportunities - Challenges

Participants felt that they faced challenges when they missed the opportunities to practise using English. Their challenges were related to time (no time and busy with their own course - classes and activities

related to their own postgraduate course - and other responsibilities) and due to the nature of the situation in terms of language usage, their own issues, and also connected to their main focus which was on their own course. The missed opportunities are illustrated in Figure 3.

As illustrated in Figure 3, time is seen insufficient due to three aspects. Firstly, as their English language proficiency course ran alongside the courses at the faculty and their ongoing research, the participants became too occupied with their own postgraduate course at their own faculty to even take the opportunity to learn English when the opportunity presented itself. Faizah had a friend who could teach her writing but “*because he study, I study – have busy schedule*” thus, she only managed to learn writing “*just one time...but after that no more*” (Faizah, interview_1).

Secondly, the participants complained of not having time to do activities they knew would benefit their language learning like talking and practising English with people (Imran, interview_2, ShamsulWahab, interview_2), using the dictionary (FatinMalik, interview_2), writing online (Fairus, interview_1), and even going out to watch a movie (FatinMalik, interview_1; Fairus, interview_1). Fairus expressed this complaint very aptly:

Participant: I think better movies to learn than by news because they don't speak very fast.

Researcher: Have you tried watching movies and learning English at the same time?

Participant: Yes. I have tried. But now I don't have time.
(laughs) (Fairus, interview_1)

The third point in relation to the lack of time is due to other responsibilities that they had. These participants are adults and their sole focus at the time of the study was not just studying. Basri was an Arabic teacher who worked “*from 8.30 to 4*” (Basri, interview_2) at an international school, whereas the married female

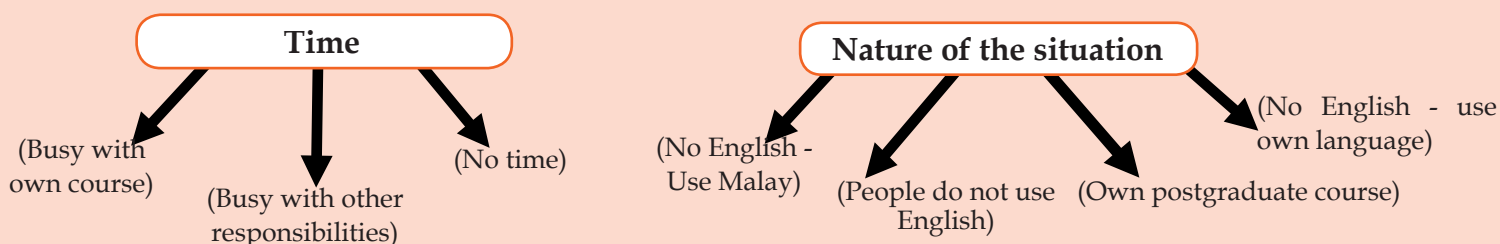


FIGURE 3 Missing opportunities

participants were occupied with their duties as mothers, especially Fatinmalik whose four children had tests or exams. She uttered, "...so I must learn [teach] them" (Fatinmalik, interview_2).

Participants admitted missing the opportunities to use English because of the nature of the situations they were in. The first is concerning language. There were times when there was no need for the use of English as illustrated by the three extracts below (participant's responses are in italics):

Extract 1: Ok. When you talk to her you speak Arabic or English?
No we speak Arabic because faster..(laughs)..to understand. (Fairus,interview_1)

Extract 2: Small shop
Is it like a grocery
Small. Everyone is Indonesian....so it is Malay. (Basri, interview_1)

Extract 3: You don't talk?
No. The one time I talked to them, they don't know English
Who?
Students. Maybe study degree but in Arabic or Malay. So they don't know English (Faizal, interview_1)

Extract 1 highlights the reason why Arabic was used instead of English while the other two extracts show that it was the people around them who preferred Malay or the lack of command of the English language of the other party made the participants miss the opportunity to speak English.

Another challenge for them is due to the nature of their own postgraduate course at their faculty. Those participants who were concurrently doing research and undergoing courses which did not emphasise on the use of English like Islamic Studies and Mathematics also lost their chance to practise and use English. Imran's discipline which is Quran and Sunnah does not require extensive English due to the nature of the course itself. He expressed that *"I find that the use of the English language in my studies of the Arabic language somewhat difficult, because I cannot translate the Koran, the Hadith, or poems, they lose their value"* (Imran, interview_1). Moreover, Fatinmalik also communicated about her mathematics major. She expressed, *"Yeah..only I try to choose only mathematical subject, so there's no [English]..."* (Fatinmalik, interview_2).

Participants also missed the opportunities to use and practise the language as being individuals, they have their own unique issues like experienced by Faizah. She is an international student. However, being an Indonesian whose looks are similar to a Malaysian, she was always spoken to in Malay and not in English; *"I think like the office...all of them talk Malay with me"*

(Faizah, interview_2). This was of course an advantage for her but this lessened her chance to practise speaking English.

All in all, the challenges faced by the participants could be summarised into two groups – the lack of time due to some issues, and the nature of some of the situations that were not really facilitating in their English language learning.

Conclusion

Having opportunities is an important entity in language learning. According to Spolsky (1989), there are generally 74 conditions for second language learning and having opportunities is a part of them. He related having opportunities as getting the practice of using the target language. Three of the conditions explain it well:

1. Condition 62 -- Opportunity for practice condition: Learning a language involves an opportunity for the new skills to be practised; the result is fluency
2. Condition 63 -- Communication condition: The language is being used for communication
3. Condition 64 -- Learning Goal condition: the language is being used so that it can be learned

These three conditions are termed as 'graded'. It means that "to the extent that (a specified condition) is met, then it is more likely that (a specified outcome) is true" (Spolsky, 1989:25). In other words, when learners practise using the target language, they will be more fluent (condition 62), and when the target language is used to communicate, learners are in fact learning the language (conditions 63 and 64) because they are utilising all the knowledge and skills to ensure that their message is passed across successfully and there is no communication breakdown. Thus, the participants seized the opportunities to use English at many occasions and accomplish tasks as they saw this as the way to make them more conversant and simultaneously learn the language.

All in all, opportunities were like two sides of a coin. On one side, the international students experienced seized opportunities where they were able to use English and accomplish tasks in English. On the other side, they experienced missed opportunities as they could not practise using English because of time and nature of the situation. Seized opportunities make them feel successful whereas missed opportunities hamper their progress in language learning.

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