

Enhancing L2 Learning among the Underachieving Learners of Mara Professional College Ayer Molek through Communicative Approach

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Abstract. Based on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, mother tongue language that we acquire ever since we were born influences the way we think and view the world. Therefore, learners face many obstacles throughout the journey of learning the L2 language due to the interference from the first language. This paper explores the claims from the past studies on the problems in English language learning faced by underachieving students in ESL classroom that occurred in Malaysia. The aim of this paper is to identify the problems that the learners claim to face concerning the English language learning in their daily life. The respondents are chosen from Diploma of Accountancy, Diploma of Business Studies and PIP(Preparatory Intensive Programme) programs in MARA (The Council of Malay Indigenous Peoples) Professional College Ayer Molek Melaka Malaysia. Based on the findings, the problems that they faced are lack of exposure and home support, lack of vocabulary knowledge, difficulties in understanding grammar rules and problems in subject-verb-agreement. The best method to be used in ESL classroom is on communicative approach such as drama and language games. It is believed that drama helps learners to enhance the spoken communication skills and improve their linguistic competence through enjoyment and education. Language games is also another suitable communicative approach that provides an exciting environment to motivate students to use English as much as they can. The study also found that parents play a critical role in helping their children to develop the ability to communicate in English. Teachers also have an important role to help the learners learning the language by being creative with their teaching materials.

1. Introduction

In the present age of globalization, almost every job in Malaysia requires some level of English proficiency. Many jobs require that the potential employees have a high level of English proficiency in both writing and speaking. It is also highly essential to learn English as a language for communication globally. According to Manivanan(2006), English is the major medium of instruction, publishing, and international communication. He also mentions that English language is widely spoken by more than 300 million native speakers and between 400-800 million speakers of other languages.

2. Statement of the problem

There are concerns regarding the declining standards of English and this can be seen from the use of English among students including University students. According to 'The Star' article dated 23rd January 2007, reported that approximately 36,000 university graduates of 2006 could be identified as low English proficient, that is considered to be either "very limited" or "limited" English users. This phenomenon is very alarming indeed. Similarly, a significant number of low English proficient learners are required to attend various English proficiency courses offered by the university normally during the semester break.

A similar problem occurs in Kolej Profesional MARA Ayer Molek Melaka (KPMAM). KPMAM is a college where English is the medium of instruction for all subjects except Religious studies and Malaysian Studies. The textbooks and other learning materials are mainly in English. Besides English subjects, other core subjects like Accounting, Finance, Economics and others are to be taught in English by the lecturers. Therefore, the students need to improve their English proficiency in order to digest the knowledge on the subjects that they learn for their chosen program (Diploma of Accountancy, Diploma of Business Studies and Preparatory Intensive program (PIP).) The college has to create an English based environment for the students so that they can improve their proficiency level. Nevertheless, the majority of the students are still struggling to grasp the language since KPMAM students are categorized as average students due to the entry requirement which needed them only to obtain 5 credits (not including English) in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysian Public Examination). Furthermore, students that are selected for entering this college are specifically for the native Malays or also known as 'Bumiputra' where 95% of the students are Malay. Marlyna, Tan and Khazriyati (2007) state that Malay students tend to use mother tongue language when interacting with family members and friends at home as well as in school. Due to that, they rarely use English outside the English classroom resulting in weak performances in their four integrated skills i.e., writing, reading, speaking and listening. Another evidence to support the statement mentioned earlier is the poor achievement of MUET results. During their studies, KPMAM students are required to sit for Malaysian Undergraduate English Test (MUET) in semester 5. The table below shows the latest MUET performance on mid year 2013.

Table 1: MUET performance analysis

MUET RESULTS/NO. OF CANDIDATES	No. of candidates	Band	No. of candidates
Band 1 (the lowest)	16	Band 4	0
Band 2	45	Band 5	0
Band 3	3	Band 6 (the highest)	0

Based on the analysis above, it is indicated that most students scored below the satisfactory level in English competency. The students have a score of band 1, 2 and 3, and none of the students achieved band 4 and above on mid-year 2013 result. The results were quite a disappointment considering that

they have been learning English as a medium of instruction for all subjects since semester 1.

Based on the study by Choy and Troudi (2006) pertaining the perceptions and attitudes towards learning English in Malaysian College, it is shown that Malaysian students on the whole have lack of exposure to English and some of them have poor attitudes towards the language. From the findings, 62% of the respondents felt that language was unimportant in secondary school as they were not required to use the language in the classroom. 65% confessed that they were afraid of making mistakes when speaking in English. It is also stated that students have no idea on the importance of the language and only learn because they have to and not for the sake of interest.

3. Significance of the study

The case study highlights the problems that the underachievement of second language(L2)learners at Kolej Profesional Mara Ayer Molek in learning the English language as a medium of instruction. It is also hoped the information that will be explored in this study can be very helpful to all KPMAM lecturers especially the English lecturers in improving their teaching skills for the sake of the students' performance. Furthermore, the students' English proficiency can be upgraded to a higher level after identifying the major problems that they face during learning the language. The information can also be valuable to the ministry of education as it will help them to improve the English syllabus as well as organizing more English courses for improving the existing English teachers in schools.

4. Research Questions

This study was based on the following research questions:

1. What are the problems that ESL students especially the Malay learners have in learning the English language?
2. What are the suitable methods to be used in Malaysian ESL classroom?

5. Literature Review

5.1Lack of Exposure and Home Support

Based on the MUET performance analysis mentioned earlier, it has been proven that KPMAM students have low proficiency in English due to the lack of exposure to the target language. Even though English is the medium of instruction in the college, it doesn't help the students to improve their proficiency level as they are seldom to use English for daily conversation among family and friends.

McLaughlin (1992) states that continued support in the home language enables children to maintain their school performance as well as reinforces the bond between the home and the school. A lot of study found that many students did not have supportive home environment for learning English. Fairuz Leman (2003) believes that lack of supportive home learning environment can be contributed to low motivational intensity for second language learners. Parents also need to consider how to strike a balance between the languages. If a child attends school in one language all day and has only a short time to hear the other language at home, it's likely the school language will develop more easily than the home language. Parents have to plan for additional time spent using the home language in a variety of situations and with a variety of speakers.

The quality of the language interaction is also vital. The language use shouldn't be too complex and parents should learn to expand their child's language as well by giving encouragement and

approval. Parents need to be good listeners and good language models by introducing rich vocabulary and varied conversations.

5.2. Lack of Vocabulary Knowledge

Improving students' vocabulary knowledge has become an educational priority. A rich vocabulary is essential to improve the four important skills especially reading. Studies have shown that reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge are strongly correlated. Hence, limited vocabularies prevent students from comprehending a text. Cynthia and Drew Johnson (2003) states that poor readers often read less because reading is difficult and frustrating for them. Due to that, students don't read enough to improve their vocabularies which could help them comprehend more.

Even though many research have shown that vocabulary knowledge plays a critical role in students' literacy development, many teachers spend a little time to teach vocabulary in the esl classroom (Scott Jamieson Noel & Asselin, 2003). Therefore, as what Brassell and Furtado (2008) mentioned in their study, the best strategy teachers should utilize to enhance their students' vocabulary growth is to provide students with as much time to read for themselves as possible so that students experience words in a variety of contexts. Teachers who provide students with plenty and variety of reading materials and opportunities to read are doing the right decision. Beyond providing students with lots of interesting books, teachers should also facilitate a variety of vocabulary activities such as vocabulary games for their students.

A research done by Sharmini, Ng Hee Liang and Ng Lee Kit (2004) on the reading problems among ESL students of secondary schools which also reflected the lack of vocabulary in their English proficiency. A service teacher who has been teaching in a different primary school for 16 years has been chosen as a respondent for this study. A semi structured interview consisting of open-ended questions has been conducted in order to capture the respondent's ideas and concerns regarding young ESL readers' problems. Based on one of her findings, it has shown that vocabulary does play a crucial role in reading. The respondent also mentioned that her students use a pocket chart to improve their vocabulary level.

5.3. The difficulties in understanding the grammar rules

Julie Larson (2007) states that limitations in the development of the English past tense affix-ed have been well-documented in ESL students across a variety of language tasks, including spontaneous conversations, elicited productions, sentence completion, sentence recall, writing samples, and grammaticality judgments. Specifically, "the morphological component of English tense marking represents the patterns children need to extract from the input in order to produce the various forms associated with past tense. Children have to learn to add "-ed" to regular verb stems and recognize the various alternative phonological processes involved in indicating the past tense of 'irregular verbs'".

There is a semantic contrast between tenses under three headings, location in time, factuality and backshifting. The primary use of the past tense indicates a situation in which "actions, events, processes, relations, states of affairs or whatever a clause expresses" are dynamic (in which case they 'take place') or static in which case they 'obtain'..The past tense may be more directly indicated by an expression including time such as "yesterday", a definite time in which the topic of the sentence occurred. Use of the past tense remarks on something that has happened, but does not necessary indicate that the situation continues into the present.

Huddleston (1984) noted the past time is an inherently relational concept; the past tense inflection indicates that the time the situation or even took place is past in relationship to another

time, usually at the time the sentence is said or written. The time of the situation in the present tense will normally be present or future, and may also be expressed in temporal terms (such as now, next week) or by a subordinate clause such as ‘when she gets here, I am going to talk to her’, indicating future. One important use of the subordinate clause is restricted to cases when the future situation in which the predicted event will take place is assured-Huddleston uses the example “He is ill next week” as a nonsensical misuse of the present tense as opposed to the action verb in “we leave for Paris next week”(145). This example shows how incorrect usage of past and present tense can not only affect communication and understanding, but it also have the potential to affect the “face” of the speaker/writer in social and work settings as well.

5.4. The major problems with Subject-Verb-Agreement among ESL learners.

Majority of the students still encounter difficulties with their subject-verb agreement in their writing. In English language, the subject must agree with the verb. If the subject is singular, a singular verb is required. On the other hand, a plural subject takes a plural verb. This rule applies greatly in simple present tense (Azar, 2005). Surina Nayan (2009), Marlyna, Khazriyati and Tan Kim Hua (2005) indicate that ESL learners especially the Malays have difficulty in understanding the rules since Bahasa Malaysia (Malaysian language) does not differentiate between person and due to that it is not necessary for verbs to agree with the subject. Nevertheless, in English language, this is important in the present tense and with the verb ‘be’. In this case, it inevitably creates confusion among the Malay learners. Even though the subject-verb-agreement structure has been explained and introduced since early primary school, they still have problems in their writing. This is also due to the fact that s-v-a is not required in the Malay language.

A case study carried out by Surina Nayan (2009) on her semester 3 students at a higher learning institution called Universiti Teknologi Mara (Mara Technology University) Perlis that comprises the majority of Malay students pertaining the S-V-A problems. The researcher gathered information through her observation, interview and written assignments. Some examples of the errors extracted from their assignments are listed below;

*I cannot work anymore. My body **feel** weak. (My body feels...)*

*Foreigners are people who **comes** from another country. (people who come)*

Another study done by Nor Hashimah, Norsimah and Kesumawati (2008) also proves that subject-verb agreement is one of the most problematic grammatical categories besides adverbs, adjectives, copula ‘BE’, plural forms and affixes. From the findings, students frequently use the wrong form of verb in a sentence which does not agree with the subject and tense such as

Naim and Zaireen cycles to school every day.

The child wash his father’s car.

5.5 Suitable methods to be used in ESL classroom.

Many researchers have shown that communicative approach is an ideal and effective way to improve students’ listening and speaking skills. It is stated by Krashen (1981) that the acquisition process itself “requires meaningful interaction in the target language whereby natural communication in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. He also believes that language can be acquired in the classroom when the focus is on the communication for example through dialogues, role-playing and other focus of meaningful interaction.

One of the most effective teaching methods that can be used in the esl classroom is through communication skills activities. The ESL classroom is a place where students develop communicative competence. The best activity that can be implemented in the class is by conducting a drama. Drama can be useful for teaching new lexical content, improving the four skills and especially for enhancing the spoken communication skills of the students. Drama is certainly an excellent technique of communicative language teaching. It can be said that important values and skills can be taught through drama. Drama in the English classroom can provide an opportunity to develop the imagination of the students. According to McCaslin(1996) drama provides an opportunity for independent thinking. Students are encouraged to express their own ideas and contribute to the whole. Creative drama will offer exercises in critical thinking and the chance for the students to be creative. It also helped the students to improve their linguistic competence through enjoyment and education.

A study done by Chamkaur Gill (2005) on the use of drama to his students at Bond University, Australia in English As A Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. After conducting a drama activity in the classroom, an interview session was held to the students in order to get the feedback from the activity. Some positive comments have been made such as

“The drama subjects, compared with other English subjects, are more challenging and interesting because they bring students to real life ...”

From the comments, it has shown that drama can be a fun and educative activity that not only can give pleasure to the students but also to enhance their language competency as well as their communication skills.

The other suitable communicative approach is through language games. According to Ghazali Bunari as cited in Shirley Ling Jen(2004), games do not only promote English as a fun subject, it is also a good ground for students to learn about team work and cooperation. Through language games, students can easily acquire other knowledge that is beneficial in their daily life. Furthermore, games are incorporated into the learning process to provide an exciting environment to motivate students to use English as much as they can. Greenall (1984) also stressed that “ language games are able to provide an opportunity for learners to try out their newly acquired competence in a context where they feel psychologically secure”. It is believed that students are less likely to be feared of making mistakes since they usually would not be penalized for making mistakes throughout the language games. Meanwhile, Wright et. al(1991) believed that games also can contribute to enhance all the language skills in many types of communication. It is also a stimulating activity that helps students to learn and use vocabulary in context. When students enjoy learning in a non-threatening environment, they will be very enthusiastic and motivated. Since language games bring a lot of benefits to the students, this activity should be implemented as one of the most important activities that can motivate students in learning the language.

6. Materials and method

Qualitative research methodology was employed in this study. 10 students and 3 English lecturers of KPM Ayer Molek Melaka were chosen to be interviewed in this study. 4 of the students, two females and one male are from semester 1 and taught by Lecturer 1. Another 2 female students are

from semester 2 taught by lecturer 2 . 2 male students are from semester 3 and another 2 male students from PIP taught by Lecturer 3.

In terms of the students' achievement in English language, 3 of them obtained grade C5 and another 2 obtained grade c6 for Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). On the other hand, there are 2 students who only managed to get E7 and another 3 students obtained grade E8.

As for the lecturers, L has been in service from 1996 until 2010 for nearly 15 years. She is in DG44 . She graduated with her first degree in the United States of America. Then, she pursued her studies in Diploma of Education and continued teaching until now. Her option is Linguistics.

Lecturer 2 has been in service from 2008 until now for more than 2 years. She is still Dg41. She graduated with her first degree in Universiti Teknologi Mara Shah Alam. Currently she is pursuing her masters in TESL at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi in final semester. Her option is TESL.

Lecturer 3 has also been service from 2008 until now for more than 2 years. She is Dg41. She is graduated with her first degree in Universiti Teknologi Mara, Shah Alam. She is also pursuing her studies in master under TESL program at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi. Her option is TESL.

The college is located 30 kilometres from Bandaraya Melaka. It has 42 lecturers and 593 students. All students come from all over Malaysia and they grow up in middle socio-economic status families. The majority of them are Malays.

7. The Findings

Based on the findings, all students rarely converse in English language with their family at home. Some of them claimed that the family has never used English at home. On the other hand, some of the respondents' family members had the initiative to speak English with them merely to practice the language for learning purpose. Nevertheless, the students themselves have negative feedback towards the respond. The statements below revealed the truth.

S1: "No. I feel shy because I am not good in English.

S3: "I don't speak English at all with my family."

S5: "My parents sometimes try to speak English with me. I understand what they are trying to say but I feel shy to reply in English. I don't know why. Probably because I am not used to speak English with my family and friends.

As for student 8 and 10, they showed some interest to use the language with their family members. Below are the findings;

S8: "I speak English with my siblings once in a while. We like to imitate the American accent just for fun."

S10: "Only once in a while with my siblings. But we use simple English words only like "come here", "Good morning", "let's eat", etc.

7.2 Teaching materials

There is no doubt that the lecturers used varieties of learning materials as reported by the students. Among the materials that interest the students are :

S1: “..... I also like spelling bee. I enjoy the class if the lesson has the element of entertainment.”

S3: “Yes especially when my lecturer brings interesting materials such as cartoon strips , watching movies and of *course playing language games. I especially like to play musical box. It is really fun.It can help me to gain my confidence level.*”

S4: “The best activity that I had is *language games*. We had reported speech games last week and we had fun.The game helped me to understand better.”

S7: “I like drama activity that my lecturer conducted in our previous class.She gave us a situation that interests us which is about the songs that we did for listening activity. I never thought that I could actually act in English. It was fun. We laughed a lot.”

S9: “Our class had a drama about meeting last week.We were given two day preparation and we are required to perform for 5-10 minutes only. It was really a fun activity.”

The college also organized 4 major English activities and one of them is Drama Competition specifically for PIP students. The students were informed about the competition early semester so that they have ample time to prepare. The chosen theme is twisted fairy tales as it would be easier for them to find sources. According to lecturer 2, there is also an english program called Interview Skills organized by the counselor unit for the selected students who considered ‘the cream’ in the college.

7.3 Lecturers’ perception

According to the interview sessions with 10 students, it was found that in particular, the students have problems in grammar, spelling, pronunciation and vocabulary, in expressing ideas in speaking and writing, and in comprehending reading, audio and audio-visual materials such as listening to music and watching tv programmes. These problems are tallied with the lecturers’ perception. Furthermore, all three lecturers seemed to agree on the same factors that caused the problems to occur.

L1: “Yes definitely,they normally have difficulties in coming up with sentences.I believe most of them were also lack on grammar and vocabulary.”

L1: “I definitely think that they have low confidence level when it comes to using the language. Vocabulary is also their weakness.”

L2: “Yes they normally have problems in speaking and writing. I am sure that they have lack of practice on grammar and vocabulary as well as ignorance on the importance of language in their future career.”

L3: “Yes they are lack of English vocabulary and unable to understand the meaning of words.

The next problem that sees the teachers’ perception matched the students’ claim is the student’s lack of exposure towards the language at home and at the college. This is illustrated in the following response:

L2: “They have lack of knowledge in the language.Most probably they have lack of exposure ever since they were learning the language.”

8. Implications and recommendations

Lecturer needs to do something with the lack of exposure and practice that KPMAM students experience in their homes and college in all 4 skills. For reading, a programme should be planned properly. It should begin with shorter texts like newspaper cuttings before going for short stories and so on. The lecturers should also choose the texts that can gain students' interest and related to their major which in this case, it should be business context. As for listening and speaking skills, kpmam students are into music and movies. Hence, it would be appropriate if the lecturers have more communicative activities that can attract students' attention. Interesting materials such as choosing the latest music and movie for listening skill can be beneficial in L2 learning purposes. Besides that, students can be exposed by performing a drama to enhance their speaking skill. By implementing these activities, lecturers are able to tackle students' interest towards the L2 learning.

The main aim of the teacher should also be on the development of students' vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. This can be done by giving the students enough examples on how to use the vocabulary and the grammar in context instead of teaching the grammar rules using the textbook that can surely petrified the students into learning the most difficult part of the english language.

The findings of this study also match the results of many previous studies of L2 learners and the experts' opinion. The factor of lack of home support match the findings of studies done by Fairuz Leman (2003) whereby he believes that lack of supportive home learning environment can be contributed to low motivational intensity for second language learners. As for the low of linguistic ability and lack of vocabulary, they match the results of studies done by Danny Brassell and Leena Furtado (2008) as they believed the best strategy teachers should utilize to enhance their students' vocabulary growth is to provide students with as much time to read for themselves as possible and frequently integrate literature into curricula so that students experience words in a variety of contexts.

9. Summary

When it comes to Malay students, exposure to English among learners at home is undoubtedly limited and does not support for English language learning. Learning English needs to be supplemented by a supportive environment inside and outside the classroom to enable the learners to improve their performance. Therefore, parents play a critical role in helping their children to develop not only the ability to communicate in English, but also an enjoyment of reading and writing in English. The more exposure the parents give to their children, the more learners will benefit from that. Nevertheless, teacher is the second most important role to help the learners especially if the parents have no strong English language background. Teacher has to be creative in order to adapt his teaching materials when it comes to teaching english. A good and creative teacher will always be able to adapt his teaching materials to the students' ability as it is not easy to capture students' attention towards the subject that is alien to them. If the teacher is skillfull, even a boring material can be used interestingly in the class. However, not all teachers are gifted to conduct the class successfully but the skills can be developed through experience. The qualifications for being a teacher also need to be improved by sending him or her for in-service courses as it can provide adequate knowledge relating to his subject and his job. English programmes such as Drama Competition and Language Games Competition should also be implemented from the beginning of early education for better exposure towards the second language(L2) learners.

In addition, the difficulties have been listed down and the factors have been clarified. Only the solutions and remedies need to be discussed and applied. Every party involved should agree whatever solutions are to be taken, they should be of students' best interests and none others.

After implemented the interview sessions and investigating the problems faced by 10 students, it helped me to realize how important the teaching technique and the materials are in order to grab the students' attention in the classroom. I am also able to reflect about my own teaching materials and techniques. Therefore, this research has enriched my knowledge and experience in qualitative research, and also to enhance my skills and ability as an English language lecturer at KPMAM. English lecturers must always alert to the needs of their students and the problems or difficulties faced by them in learning the language so that they are capable of finding the best solution to help and assist the students.

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