

The Impact of English Language Proficiency on Interpersonal Interactions among Students from Different Nationalities in a Malaysian Public University

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ABSTRACT

English language is the main communicative means among local and international students of Malaysian universities. Thus, this study was carried out to evaluate the impact of English language proficiency (ELP) on interpersonal and intergroup interactions among students from different nationalities in a Malaysian public university. An embedded design of mixed methods with the predominant role of the quantitative method was applied to conduct this study. The quantitative method, with 220 participants from both local and international students, was used as the main method and interviews were carried out to enrich the data. The results of this study confirmed that ELP is among the main factors that affect the process of interactions among local and foreign students of Malaysian public universities. Based on the findings of this study, lack of ELP among both local and international students and their different accents and linguistic assumptions have negative impacts on the process of interactions among them.

Keywords: English language proficiency, interpersonal interactions, different nationalities, Malaysian universities

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication among students from different cultural backgrounds at modern higher education institutions, especially in Malaysian universities, is an important issue to be evaluated. Gathering of students from different nationalities at university campuses helps them to gain some essential skills and improve their personal

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abilities. University time must be considered as an important period for all students to achieve their goals and to experience new contacts with people from different social backgrounds (Wade, 2008). Both local and foreign students of Malaysian universities can improve their personal competences and academic abilities through their contacts with different people. According to Lin (2011), interactions have important impacts on enabling people to learn, to recognise and to meet the requirements of the new societies. Enrolment of students from different social and cultural backgrounds with their different communicative norms and different language proficiencies at the same campus, besides its beneficial aspects, may challenge their interpersonal competence as well.

According to Reed (2008), the collegiate environments are productive and important for students to increase their skills. Yoshida *et al.* (2013) points out language skills are among the important preconditions for successful interactions among people from different cultural backgrounds. Interactions among students from different nationalities may ease the ways for them to evaluate their language proficiency and personal skills so as to shape their communicative norms based on their perceptions from their daily contacts. As asserted by Martin-Beltrán (2010), through their direct contacts, the communicators can assess the perceptions of competence and proficiency of their counterparts and interlocutors. Language proficiency is important for both the social and academic lives of students, and a good

level of ELP may help them to be happier in the workplace after their university time. Because of the essential role of English language in the labour market, many language departments established their policies which require language teachers to use the English language as their communication means when talking and interacting with students and colleagues (Froese *et al.*, 2012).

English language is the main means of communication among local and international students of Malaysian universities. Therefore, the level of ELP among students from different cultural backgrounds in Malaysian universities may affect their contacts and collaborations. At the same time, good skills in English language help students to be more successful in their daily interactions. Huang (2010) argues that students with good level of language proficiency do better when interacting with the host people for their social and academic needs. However, there are insufficient studies on the effects of ELP on the process of interactions among local and international students of Malaysian universities in the literature. Thus, this study was designed to assess the impacts of ELP on the process of interactions among local and international students of a Malaysian public university, namely, Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP).

THEORETICAL SUPPORT

The theory which directs this study is the Contact Theory of Allport (1954). The Contact Theory is one of the leading theories

on intergroup interactions and has led many studies and research, and recognised as an important framework for strategies on contacts among different groups for more than 50 years (Aidoo, 2012). The Contact Theory grabbed the attention of many researchers, scholars and policymakers when the Supreme Court of the United States designed the innovative act of Brown V. Board of Education for integration under its guidance. The Contact Theory was introduced by Allport in his famous book, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Dovidio *et al.* 2003).

Allport (1954) stated his apprehensions and views about the successful and beneficial interactions and contacts among people from different backgrounds who are facing conflicts and prejudice in the societies. Based on his statements, interaction among different groups begins with the *sheer contact* stage, which leads into the *competition* stage as a third step continues into the *accommodation* stage, and finally the process reaches the *assimilation* stage. For a successful intergroup interaction to happen, Allport (1954) proposed four preconditions: the existence of equal ranks, common goals among communicators, intergroup collaborations, and the existence of formal supports (law, customs, environment and authorities).

Besides Allport's proposed conditions for the intergroup contacts, some other scholars worked on the Contact Theory and introduced some steps and preconditions for successful contacts among the different people. Pettigrew (1998) introduced three

new preconditions for the Contact Theory to ease the ways for fruitful intergroup contacts among people from the different groups and social backgrounds. His first proposed condition is the existence of the individualised and de-categorised situation, where threats and anxiety may differentiate acts and interactions of the individual communicators. The second proposed condition is the impacts of primary interactions among people on a remarkable categorisation which probably raise the positive attitudes of the people. The third precondition which was proposed by Pettigrew (1998) is the continuation of interpersonal and intergroup contacts among the people based on their positive attitudes which pave the ways for the awareness of re-categorisation among the people.

The steps and preconditions, which were introduced through the above mentioned scholars, are all supportive of the process of interactions among students from different social and cultural backgrounds in a collegiate environment. As students enter universities as individuals and through their contacts with their peers from different races and nationalities, they establish their networks and assimilate and re-categorise in a new environment. Of course, as English language is the main communicative means among local and international students of Malaysian universities, the level of their ELP will affect and be affected through their daily contacts and interactions. The main goal of this study was to evaluate interpersonal interactions among local and international students of a Malaysian

public university, who belong to different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Thus, Contact Theory which is a famous theory in intergroup interactions was used as the theoretical framework for this study. At the same time, English language is the main communicative means among students from different nationalities in Malaysian universities. The level of ELP must be considered as an important factor that affects all the four steps of the Contact Theory for the process of interactions among people from different backgrounds. The step, which is *sheer contact*, leads into *competition*, *accommodation* and finally *assimilation*. Therefore, the steps proposed by Allport (1954) through his Contact Theory are suitable to guide this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language proficiency is an important influencing factor on the process of interactions among students from the different nationalities. According to Tavakoli and Rakhshandehroo (2014), language proficiency refers to the level of skills that an individual can speak, write and read a language or understand the language. The direct and spoken contacts among students may help them to gain some new communicative skills and improve their language proficiency. As pointed out by Martin-Beltrán (2010), practice of language accommodation in the interpersonal setting is an implicit way of involving students in group discussions. It is also essential to evaluate the ways that help students to construct their language proficiency

in the collegiate environment. Through better understanding of the procedures and development of proficiency among people, educators will be able to focus on the ways that improve the context of language learning (Martin-Beltrán, 2010).

Based on the arguments of previous researchers, the level of ELP has direct and important impacts on the process of interactions among people from different nationalities. Huang (2010) conducted a study on the role of media use and interpersonal communication among international students at the University of Buffalo, State University of New York. Based on his findings, he argued that foreign students with self-reliance of their language proficiency during their interactions with host people assume that they do better in the academic and social affairs (Huang, 2010). In a qualitative study of cultural experiences of Arab and American students of American colleges, Abdulla (2008) also pointed out that language is believed to be an obstacle for people, including the ones who are able to speak the different languages. Different implications and cultural usage of language exist among speakers and that might cause misinterpretations. Different cultural backgrounds are also known as restrictive of deepness of friendships among different cultures. Because feelings of how to spend free times, life priorities or even general themes of interests were different from Americans to Arabs (Abdulla, 2008).

Some personal characteristics like shyness may also affect the process of improvement of ELP among students.

As argued by Fallah (2014), shyness can affect the process of English language learning and also the self-confidence and motivations of the learners significantly. However, continuation of involvements in interactions may help students to improve the level of their ELP. At the same time, the direct communication and language proficiency have mutual effects on each other and involvements in interactions may improve both the language proficiency and communication skills of the communicators. Fallah (2014) stated that, from the beginning of focusing on the conversational and communicative contexts to the learning process of the second language, communication has been considered as an essential procedure and an important aim for learning the second language.

At the same time, some previous researchers found close relationships between ELP and communication among people from different cultures who use English language as the means of their interactions. From a study on the relationships between academic language and academic communication, Haneda (2014) found that academic language (English) is an essential requirement among students for their academic interactions that enable them to achieve their personal, social and intellectual goals. Uzun (2014), based on the findings of a study on the role of English language in the technology mediated intercultural interactions in the practical environments, argued that besides the internet, communicative technology and

cultural information, English language is among the important elements that enable people to have successful intercultural communication. Moreover, Jamshidnejad (2011), based on the results of a study on practical approach of interaction strategies, pointed out that individuals would will have numerous achievements in communication and language information through the use of interaction strategies and teamwork. Based on the assertions and arguments of previous researchers, ELP is among the main factors influencing interactions among communicators from the different nationalities who use English language as the means of their contacts. Their interactions also help them to improve the level of their ELP.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

An embedded design of mixed methods was conducted to carry out this study. The predominant method for this study was the quantitative survey with the participation of 220 from both local and international students of UMP. The embedded design is one of the main classifications of the mixed methods in which a secondary data set plays the supportive role for the main or primary data in a study (Creswell & Palo Clark, 2007). Qualitative interviews were also conducted to further validate the information. The quantitative data collection procedure was applied through the direct survey by distribution of the questionnaires. All participants of the quantitative survey were chosen based on the convenience

sampling procedure. The quantitative data were mostly collected from the places like hostel, library, cafeteria and classrooms, where both local and international students of UMP gather and interact. An interview invitation note was added in the introduction section of the quantitative questionnaire. Through that invitation note, the participants of the quantitative survey were asked to leave contact details in case of their agreements to be participated in the qualitative section as well. All interviewees of this study were chosen based on their own agreements through the quantitative questionnaire. The qualitative data were collected through interviews with 12 participants from Malaysian and foreign students of UMP (6 local and 6 international students). All interviews were done directly and audio-taped.

The main instrument for the quantitative method of this study was the questionnaire. The quantitative instrument was prepared based on Likert's scale and 12 open-ended interview questions were designed for the qualitative section of this study. The instruments were prepared by the researchers of this study with reference to the questionnaires and instruments of some previous works (e.g., Izumi, 2010; Gao, 2011; Aidoo, 2012). Prior to the final data collection procedure, the questionnaire was checked and revised through conducting of a pilot study. Slavin (2007) states that pilot tests play the role of experimental runs of the research project which is carried out to test and fix the instruments. The reliability of instruments was checked through SPSS

and the Cronbach's alpha score for all items (questions) of the questionnaire was .705. The questionnaire for this section included 14 options based on the Likert's scale.

Participants

A total of 220 UMP students who are Malaysian and international students participated in this study. The numbers of participants from both local and international students were chosen equally as follows: local students, $N = 110$ ($M = 45.63$, $SD = 6.61$) and foreign students, $N = 110$ ($M = 41.75$, $SD = 6.60$). From 220 students, the number of male participants was 147 ($M = 42.91$, $SD = 60.60$), while the number of female participants was 73 ($M = 45.27$, $SD = 6.63$). At the time of this study, all the participants were degree and postgraduate students of UMP and the vast majority of them were in the age categories of 18-22 and 23-29 as from the category of 18-22 $N = 95$ ($M = 43.93$, $SD = 5.91$) and the category of 23-29 $N = 87$ ($M = 42.98$, $SD = 5.96$). Based on the results, only 17.3% of the participants were in the age categories of 30-36 and 37+. The Malaysian participants of this study belonged to different parts and all major ethnicities in the country. The foreign participants came from 16 different countries and are from different parts of the globe, with the majority of them from Asian countries. Table 1 demonstrates the frequencies of the foreign participants of this study according to their home countries.

The quantitative and qualitative data of this study were analysed separately. The quantitative data were examined through

the essential options of SPSS, and findings of the qualitative interviews were analysed under the themes and categories based on the research-, and interview-questions.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data were analysed through the descriptive test of SPSS. The quantitative data of this manuscript focused on the ELP level among all 220 participants of the study and its effects on their daily interpersonal interactions. Based on the descriptive results, from all 220 participants, 67.8% of them reported that they already had some direct and spoken interactions with their peers from the different nationalities and social backgrounds. Moreover, based on their responses, 32.2% of them did not experience any direct interaction with students of other nationalities and cultural backgrounds. The majority of the participants (78.2%) reported that they use English language as the means of their contacts with students from other countries. Furthermore, from all the participants, 60.1% stated that that they were able to understand almost all

parts of the conversations and messages during their interactions and talks with the students from different countries and social backgrounds. Majority of the participants (75.9%) illustrated that their social and academic needs encouraged them to focus on their English skills and interact with different people. However, from all of the participants, the self-reported ELP level of 4.5% of them was 6.0 or above, 22% of them had the ELP level of 5.0-5.5, and the ELP scores of the majority of participants, 60.5% of them were between 4.0 up to 5.0. The scores were considered based on the IELTS and UMP English Proficiency Test (EPT). The EPT test also follows the IELTS testing and scoring system. Based on the quantitative findings, students with the ELP level of 5.0 or above (either IELTS or EPT) were good in their interactions with peers of different nationalities at the UMP campus. However, students who had low levels of ELP (less than the IELTS/EPT score of 5.0) were not satisfied with their communications and interactions with peers from other nationalities.

TABLE 1
Frequencies of international participants based on their countries

Country	Frequency	Country	Frequency
China	18	Libya	6
Indonesia	13	Nigeria	5
Iraq	13	Sudan	4
Yemen	13	Algeria	1
Afghanistan	10	Canada	1
Pakistan	9	Egypt	1
India	8	Iran	1
Bangladesh	6	Somalia	1

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings from the interviews were analysed separately based on the research questions and answers of the participants and under the emerging themes and sub-themes. The qualitative data, as a secondary data, play a supportive role for the main data which are quantitative.

To report the results of the qualitative interviews, both the local and foreign groups of interviewees are coded as LPX and FPX as LPX (X instead of the number for the participant) for the local participants and FPX for the international participants. For example, participant LP1 means local participant number 1, and both groups are coded as: (1) LP1, a Master Malay-Malaysian student, (2) LP2, a degree Malay-Malaysian student, (3) LP3, a degree Indian-Malaysian student, (4) LP4, a degree Indian-Malaysian student, (5) LP5, a degree Malay-Malaysian student, and (6) LP6, a senior degree Chinese-Malaysian student. International interviewees are coded as: (1) FP1, a master student from Afghanistan, (2) FP2, a PhD student from India, (3) FP3, a PhD student from Algeria, (4) FP4, a senior degree student from China, (5) FP5, a degree student from Yemen, and (6) FP6, a master student from Nigeria.

Almost all of the interviewees of the qualitative section of this study pointed out the lack of ELP among both local and international students of UMP as one of the main factors which resulted in the negative effects on the process of interactions among them. For example, participant LP1 stated that “English language is the main

factor that affects our communication with international students, and both local and international students of UMP have some problems with language proficiency.” His views are supported by participant FP4, who asserted that “lack of skills in English language is major problem and prevents us to communicate successfully.” Participant FP2 pointed that “Both local and international students of UMP must develop their language proficiency, especially in English language.” They also pointed out that they should try to gain the essential skills of communication to be more successful in their interactions since the lack of language skills and speaking abilities are the main problems for the students who interact with different people. Based on the statements of the interviewees, a good level of English language proficiency helps students to have more successful interactions with students from different nationalities at the university campus.

Participant FP3 asserted that “The main factor that affect interactions among students and prevents some students to be involved in the daily contacts with the different people is lack of English language skills.” His statement is supported by the view of participants LP2 who said “My problems in English language and lack of experience on interactions with foreigners undermine my daily contacts with other international students in UMP.” Participant LP6 pointed out the use of slangs and different accents by different people as one of the main problems, “the use of different slangs by foreign students from different countries and

their different accents are among the main challenges.” Finally, participant FP4 stated his personal experience, “My involvements in interactions with local students and foreign students from other countries were very helpful for me and both of my language proficiency social skills improved through this process.” He also stated that “As new student when I joined the UMP, I faced different problems and I was not able to talk with other people and go to other places like Kuantan city. I was also not able to ask questions from the lecturers or discuss with my classmates, but with time and through my daily interactions with my local classmates and other students in the campus, I have managed to solve these problems.” According to the views of all the participants of this section, ELP is among the main factors affecting the process of interactions among local and international students of Malaysian universities, especially UMP. The findings of the qualitative data are supportive of the quantitative results of this study.

DISCUSSION

This study was carried out to evaluate the efficacy of English language proficiency (ELP) on the process of interpersonal and intergroup interactions among local and international students of a Malaysian public university. As argued by Martin-Beltrán (2010), understanding the way proficiency among people is developed will help the educators to advance the language learning context. English language is the main means of communication among local

and international students of Malaysian universities and also the main academic language for the higher education in the country. Besides other factors that affect interactions among students from different countries and cultural backgrounds in the Malaysian collegiate environments, the level of ELP among students was also assessed. The results of both the quantitative and qualitative data confirmed that the level of ELP among the students had direct impacts on their daily interactions and communication with students who speak different languages. The findings of this study are also supported by the results of some previous studies on related issues. English language and communications among people from different backgrounds have direct relations. People with good levels of ELP have more successful interactions, and daily interactions among them improve the level of their ELP as well (Haneda, 2014; Uzun, 2014; Jamshidinejad, 2011).

According to both the quantitative and the qualitative results, the level of their ELP influences the quality and frequency of interpersonal communication among students from the different nationalities on the university campus. Based on the quantitative results, students who achieved a good level of ELP reported that they were satisfied and able to understand most of the messages and conversations during their interactions with other students using English language as the means of their communication. At the same time, the level of ELP among university students must be counted as an essential part of their

professional life as well. This argument is supported by Froese *et al.* (2012), who pointed out that because of the important role of English language in the market, the different language institutions under the particular regulations require instructors to use English language when interacting with their students and co-workers.

The results of this study confirmed that a good level of ELP among students from different nationalities helps them to have more successful contacts. Huang (2010) pointed out that international students with better language abilities might be more successful in their social and academic affairs. One of the main social issues for the foreign students in the host country is to have a good level of interactions with the local people and their language proficiency will enable them to do so. The modern multicultural university environment asks the students who stay and study in these locations to be involved in interactions with their peers from various social backgrounds. University time is also an important opportunity for students to improve their skills through their daily contacts and talks with different people, including the level of their ELP. Wade (2008) also focuses on the positive effects of the university environment on the personal life and social skills of the students.

Furthermore, according to the results of this study, the lack of ELP among both local and international students is the main factor that has negative effects on the process of their interpersonal and intergroup interactions. However, daily interactions

among students from the different nationalities and social backgrounds have positive effects on their level of ELP. Based on the qualitative results, through their interpersonal interactions with different people, students improved their language skills and also become familiar with the different slangs and accents which are used by the people of different countries. In the qualitative data, some local participants pointed out the use of slangs and different accents by foreign students as challenging factors for successful communications with them. These findings are supportive of the assertion of Abdulla (2008) who states that language is assumed as one of the main hurdles for the communicators who interact with different people, even for the people who can speak different languages. The use of different accents, synonyms and slangs by people of different countries undermines the language proficiency of non-native speakers. Almost all of the qualitative interviewees suggested that improved ELP among students as an essential requirement for conducting more successful interactions among them. They also pointed out that the lack of ELP among some of their peers as a discouraging point for their daily contacts. This issue is supportive of the assertion of Martin-Beltrán (2010) who argued that the communicators could evaluate the level of competence and proficiency of the people who are in contact with them and they could establish some new ways of communication through their awareness.

However, the main findings of this study are the positive effects of similar level of

ELP of the communicators on their contacts and also the helpful impacts of daily interactions among them on improving the level of their ELP. The argument of mutual positive effects of language proficiency and interpersonal communication between/among the different people also is supported by the findings of this study. In addition, the main findings of this study include the negative effects of the lack of ELP and the use of different accents and unfamiliar slangs in a setting where people from different countries use English language as the means of their interactions rather than their own language or the language of the host people. These findings are quite new and probably different from findings of studies in the countries where foreign students use English language as the means of their communication with the host people who are native speakers of this language. These findings may answer some questions in relation to issues and highlight the importance of ELP in the process of interactions among students of different nationalities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Students from the different countries and cultural backgrounds at modern universities of the emerging hubs of higher education, including Malaysia, use English language as the means for their daily communications. Thus, the issue of ELP and its effects on contacts and collaborations among students remain important and interesting. Future researchers should evaluate the role of ELP on both the social and academic lives

of students from different nationalities in the modern collegiate environment. They can also conduct experimental studies to evaluate the effects of ELP on the interactions among young and newly graduated employees from the different social backgrounds in a multicultural workplace. The current study was conducted in a young Malaysian public university located in a suburb area with limited number of international students. Therefore, studies conducted on the same issues at well-established universities located in urban areas with more international students and located in the cosmopolitan locations may bring different results.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the influence of English language proficiency (ELP) on the process of interpersonal interactions among local and international students of a Malaysian public university. The participation of 220 students from the different countries and cultural backgrounds enabled this study to include the views of different people in a manuscript. Based on the findings of this study, ELP was among the main factors that influenced interactions among students from the different countries. Both the quantitative and qualitative results illustrated that students with good level of ELP had more interactions with their peers and were satisfied during their interactions. The results of this study also showed that the lack of ELP had negative effects on interpersonal and intergroup interactions among the participants of this study. Based on the

participants' responses, their involvement in interpersonal communication with their peers helped them to improve their ELP level. At the same time, they mentioned the use of different accents and slangs among students from the different countries as an obstacle towards their understanding and their satisfactions when interacting with other students. However, more studies in the related issues may answer more questions and further information on the impacts of Malaysian students' language proficiency on their interpersonal and intergroup interactions with those from different cultures and countries.

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