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QUALITATIVE STUDY ON STUDENTS' SELF-EFFICACY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES IN ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Despite of being categorized among top twelve out of 72 countries in English language proficiency ranking, Malaysian students in real life, still have issues with English language and engagement in English language classes. Hence, this study aimed to investigate factors that affect students' self-efficacy and language learning strategies that could help students boost their confidence in using the language. A qualitative research design was employed with a purposive sampling method that involved 10 students of Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN), Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Campus in a structured interview session. The study revealed that personal factors were key determiners affecting one's self-efficacy in using the language whereas cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies were equally rated as the most effective language learning strategies to be used to boost ESL learners' language proficiency. It is hoped this study could benefit curriculum designers, as well as English language practitioners in developing practical pedagogical and personal strategies to deal with English language learners with low self-efficacy.

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1. Introduction

Globally, English language has become a prominent language in all settings including education, business and other formal occasions. In fact, its usage is not limited to communication per se, but it is also used for other purposes (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). Due to its significance, English language is now regarded as lingua franca. Kirkpatrick (2010) defined lingua franca as a mutual language used between people who are from different language backgrounds. It is indeed used as a medium of interaction internationally by speakers from different countries whose mother tongue is not English. In the Southeast Asia countries, English language is regarded either as the second language or foreign language (Phuong, 2012). The former applies to the countries that were once colonised by the British such as Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Philippines while the latter concerns with the rest of the countries in the Southeast Asia (Phuong, 2012).

2. Problem Statement

It was recently reported that Malaysia is among top twelve out of 72 countries around the globe which participated in the ranking for English language proficiency (EF English Proficiency Index, 2017). The leading Asian country is Singapore at the sixth rank, followed by Malaysia and the Philippines in the twelfth and thirteenth places, respectively. Despite the notable score, Nor Aini and Normazla's (2008) study revealed that their students were passively involved in the English language classroom. Some of them were reluctant to answer questions in the target language and a number of others parrot sentence structures given by the instructors as to show their lack of competency in the English language.

The finding from Nor Aini and Normazla (2008) is further supported by the researcher's personal experience in teaching English language at Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN) where English language is not commonly used by students. In fact, most of them are experiencing language anxiety since the tender age of seven years of age (from primary school level). Hazlina (2016) also reported similar case in her observation of new graduates whereby despite of their high academic performance, they still struggle using the language at the workplace.

The above problem related to English language proficiency may happen due to numerous factors of which the two most influential ones are self-efficacy and language learning strategies.

3. Research Questions

1. What are the contributing factors that affect the degree of students' self-efficacy?
2. What language learning strategy would be best used to boost students' self-efficacy in using English language?

4. Purpose of the Study

1. To investigate factors affecting UNITEN students' self-efficacy in relation to English language strategies, and

2. To suggest an efficient language learning strategy that can boost students' self-efficacy and level of proficiency in English language.

5. Research Methods

5.1. There were four phases of interview process that include, preparing the interview questions (including validation and amendment), identifying the target respondents who meet the required criteria, conducting the interview and transcribing the data into written form.

5.2. After interview questions were finalized, researcher contacted potential respondents personally to set an appointment for an interview session. The information of MUET result was received from Registrar Office of UNITEN Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah campus. Once the potential respondents agreed to participate, one-to-one interview was conducted, and it took place only 10-15 minutes for each session.

5.3. The interview session was conducted on 10 respondents from different levels of English language proficiency. For this purpose, as shown I Table 01, the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was used as basis on which the respondents' level of proficiency.

Table 01. Number of Respondents based on MUET Result

MUET Result	No. of Respondents
Band 1	2
Band 2	2
Band 3	2
Band 4	2
Band 5	2
Band 6	0

6. Findings

The table 02 below presents the respondents' feedback on factors affecting students' self-efficacy which was received from the interview session. The interviewees were asked a simple direct question, "What affects or influences your confidence level to use English language?" and the responses were transcribed in the following table 02.

Table 02. Respondents' Responses in Relation to Factors Affecting Students' Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Respondents	MUET Result	Response (<i>What affects or influences your confidence level to use English language?</i>)
Student 1	Band 1	<i>Get help from friends</i>
Student 2	Band 1	<i>When I looking my parents speaking English with other people</i>
Student 1	Band 2	<i>I read a lot of cartoon in English literature, most of video stream by the gamers, they talk in English. It help me to improve my English so much</i>
Student 2	Band 2	<i>English make us look standard</i>
Student 1	Band 3	<i>Support from colleagues Potential to improve myself</i>
Student 2	Band 3	<i>Not confidence in my grammar</i>

Student 1	Band 4	<i>Self-pleasure and self-pride</i> <i>Educational background</i> <i>The people I am talking to</i>
Student 2	Band 4	<i>The urge to try</i>
Student 1	Band 5	<i>Constant application; both formal and informal</i> <i>Watching English-medium talks and conferences</i> <i>Reading high-level books</i>
Student 2	Band 5	<i>Have been in the US before for 3 years.</i> <i>More comfortable in speaking in English.</i>

Band 1 Respondents (Extremely Limited Users)

The first respondent seemed not to understand the question as he responded that he “*get help from friends*”. The response could be out of context but his effort to reply in English language is highly appreciated. The second respondent from Band 1 responded that her parents are the motivation for her to use English language. Her response, “*when I looking my parents speaking English with other people*” implies that she has admiration towards her parents who can speak good English with other people.

Band 2 Respondents (Limited Users)

Student 1 from Band 2 responded “*I read a lot of cartoon in English literature, most of video stream by the gamers, they talk in English. It help me to improve my English so much*” while the student 2 from Band 2 said that “*English make us look standard*”. From the first response, it is comprehended that video games could be the source of motivation for students to learn or use English language. Meanwhile, the second respondent has a perception that using the English language could gain respect and elevate the speaker’s social status.

Band 3 Respondents (Modest Users)

The first respondent mentioned that “*support from colleague*” could affect his confidence level to use English language meanwhile the second respondent did not respond to the question, instead he said that he is not confident with his English grammar.

Band 4 Respondents (Good Users)

The first student from Band 4 in response to the interview question mentioned that his “*self-pleasure and self-pride*” could be the source of motivation for him to use English language apart from his educational background that requires him to use the language. Besides, he also added that the person whom he talks to could be the factor of what language he should use. The second student on the other hand responded that she herself has “*the urge to try*” to use the language which indirectly implies that self-motivation could be one of the factors.

Band 5 (Very Good Users)

The first respondent in his statement mentioned that he regularly use the language in both settings; formal and informal and that makes him to be better in the language besides “*watching English-medium talks and conferences*” and “*reading high-level books*” on regular basis. Meanwhile the second respondent

did say she is naturally more comfortable in using the English language as she has been the United State for three years before this.

The responses from all respondents were then grouped into four major factors; social, personal, prior exposure and media as presented in the table 03 below.

Table 03. Factors Affecting Students' Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Responses	Factors
<i>Get help from friends</i>	Social
<i>When I looking my parents speaking English with other people</i>	Social
<i>I read a lot of cartoon in English literature, most of video stream by the gamers, they talk in English. It help me to improve my English so much</i>	Media
<i>English make us look standard</i>	Personal
<i>Support from colleagues</i>	Social
<i>Potential to improve myself</i>	Personal
<i>Not confidence in my grammar</i>	Personal
<i>Self-pleasure and self-pride</i>	Personal
<i>Educational background</i>	Personal
<i>The people I am talking to</i>	Social
<i>The urge to try</i>	Personal
<i>Constant application; both formal and informal</i>	Social
<i>Watching English-medium talks and conferences</i>	Media
<i>Reading high-level books</i>	Media
<i>Have been in the US before for 3 years.</i>	Prior Exposure
<i>More comfortable in speaking in English.</i>	Personal

With a total of sixteen responses from ten respondents, seven responses indicated that personal factors such as learners' attitude (as in learners' perception towards the English language), self-confidence, belief, pride and education background were the most rated factors that could affect one's self-efficacy beliefs in using the English language. The second highest rated factors were social factors that include peer support, parents and constant use on daily basis in formal and informal contexts, with five responses followed by media factors and prior exposure with three and one responses, respectively. Media factors includes English television programmes, video games and books whereas prior exposure in this case refers to the learners' previous experience residing in English-speaking country.

Table 04. Students' Responses on Language Learning Strategy That Can Boost Self-Efficacy and English Language Proficiency

	Memory	Cognitive	Compensation	Metacognitive	Affective	Social
Band 1	/	//		//	//	/
Band 1	/	//		//	/	//
Band 2	//	//	//	//	//	//
Band 2	/	/				//
Band 3	/	//	//	//	/	/
Band 3	/	/	/	//	/	/
Band 4	/	//	/	//	//	//
Band 4	/	//	//	//	/	/

Band 5	/	//	/	//	/	//
Band 5	/	//	/	//		/
Total	11	18	10	18	11	15

The above table 04 shows the response from the respondents regarding the learning strategy that can boost students' self-efficacy belief and English language proficiency. The respondents during the interview were given two options for each learning strategy to choose from and it is found that majority of the respondents despite of their MUET results believed that cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies with the highest frequency, 18 as the most favourable in helping students to boost their self-efficacy in using the language. The second highest learning strategy chosen by the respondents was social strategy with 15 frequency, followed by memory and affective strategies, 11 and compensation strategy was the least rated learning strategy in helping students boost their self-efficacy with 10 frequency.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Limitations

The data obtained from the interview disclosed that respondents came out with a wide variation of responses to the question. Hence, the researcher had difficulty in grouping the themes as there is no similar response obtained from all ten respondents. In fact, there are few answers not relatable to the question asked where most of them did respond on "how to improve your English language?" instead of answering question "what affects or influences your confidence level to use English language?" One of the Band 5 respondents for an instance in response to the question said that constant use of the target language, watch and read English language materials may be helpful to boost one's confidence level in using the language that seem to be unrelated to the question. Another Band 5 respondent likewise misunderstood the question by saying that she has been in the United States for three years before that makes her to be more comfortable to use the language. What could be implied, nonetheless is that having prior experience using the language amongst native speakers and the exposure to use English language in an environment where no one judges (since the student is seen as a foreigner having to use the language) did help to enhance the students' self-efficacy when using the language in Malaysia.

Despite the positive findings, the study is only limited to UNITEN context, hence they do not represent other students in other local institutions. It is hoped that future researchers could replicate the study on a larger sample in other higher learning institutions. The research could also be conducted using mixed method in order to get in-depth results from the respondents. With the current findings, English language instructors are expected to be more conscious of students' level of self-efficacy in English language classroom, whereas English language learners also need to be more selective in adopting proper language learning strategy that can help them boost their self-efficacy in learning the target language.

7.2. Recommendation

Knowing the level of students' efficacy beliefs is important for curriculum designers as it helps to predict students' performance even better than their actual capabilities in academic setting (Bandura, 1997). It is suggested to every English language instructors and curriculum designers to investigate students' level

of self-efficacy beforehand in order to come out with suitable language contents and activities that are at par with students' abilities. Besides, knowledge on students' preferred language learning strategies could also help curriculum designers and teachers to come out with effective language learning activities that can instil positive attitudes towards the target language among students.

As for students, the finding could recommend some ideal learning strategies that are believed to be effective to them. Previous researches revealed that those who employ language learning strategies are proven to be more successful than those who do not (Abraham & Vann, 1987; O'Malley et al., 1990; Politzer & McGroarty, 1985; Salahshour, et al., 2013).

7.3. Conclusion

From the qualitative data, it was reported that students had equally rated metacognitive and cognitive strategies as the most efficient methods to boost students' self-efficacy beliefs and English language proficiency. Both strategies are inter-related in a way that metacognitive involves the awareness and control function over the way information is acquired meanwhile cognitive strategies concerns the content that a learner chooses to be included in his or her learning process (Cera et al., 2013). The least rated learning strategy that was not favoured by UNITEN students is compensation strategy. Even though Ehrman and Oxford (1989) in their study found that compensation strategies significantly contributes to the second language proficiency, but it was less accepted by the local context in UNITEN.

Despite the difficulties to categorise the responses, the researcher eventually grouped them into four factors namely social, personal, prior exposure and media. Personal factors which include learners' attitudes and perceptions towards the English language, self-confidence, and education background were highly rated in the interview. Students' attitudes and motivation are undeniably play important roles in affecting their proficiency as presented by Petrides (2006) in her study on a group of Year 6 Cyprus students in which it was revealed that personal factors like learners' attitudes and motivations had statistical significance on their English language proficiency. Social factors likewise are important in affecting one's self-efficacy in using English language. Peer support for an instance could also be a factor as discovered in Sari et al.'s (2017) experimental research.

As for the factors affecting students' self-efficacy, there was not concrete response from the respondents, however there were responses in which it is said that learners' family and education background, constant exposure to the target language and peer support could be the factors affecting one's self-efficacy beliefs in using the English language.

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