

38. Motivation towards learning English among Malaysian university students with low proficiency level

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ABSTRACT

The ability to speak English is increasingly important in many parts of the world, and perhaps especially in countries such as Malaysia, where English is used both educationally and professionally. However a number of studies of Malaysian students (e.g. Samsiah et al., 2009; Muftah & Rafik-Galea, 2013) have shown that there are issues around English language learning, and suggest that these issues relate to student motivation. Given the little research which has been done in Malaysia, it is important to know more about the motivation of those students who are apparently not successful in their English language learning. This paper will investigate Malaysian university students' motivation in learning English. The 190 participants are first year students at the *Universiti Malaysia Kelantan* (UMK) who achieved poorly on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), reaching only Band 1 or Band 2. The students are chosen from across five different faculties at UMK to provide a variety of views about these students' L2 motivation. The motivation of the students in learning English is analysed in the light of Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System, which looks at L2 motivation in terms of three dimensions: ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience in understanding L2 motivation. Data was collected via a questionnaire modified from Taguchi et al. (2009), and has been analysed using descriptive statistics. The paper will discuss the overall motivational patterns towards learning English of these low-achieving Malaysian university students. The findings suggest that students are highly motivated to learn English, however they are largely influenced by external factors, because of the importance of English for their professional education and future careers.

Keywords: motivation, English, low proficiency level, university students, Malaysia

Introduction

In the Malaysian context, English plays a vital role in the students' future success. They need to learn English in order to pass their English exam, to graduate from university, to be able to proceed to the highest educational and social levels, to study abroad and to get a better job after their graduation. With regards to these factors, the learning of English as a second language has become much more important for the future needs of the students.

In relation to second language learning, one important factor for success in language learning is motivation, that is, the amount of effort that people are prepared to put into their language learning (Gardner, 1985; Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito, & Sumrall, 1993; Brown, 2007). With regard to motivational studies, research on motivation in Malaysia has been mainly based on the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), with most findings revealed that Malaysian students are generally extrinsically rather than intrinsically motivated (Ainol Madziah & Isarji, 2009; Parilah, 2002; Samsiah et al., 2009). Studies on motivation in the Malaysian context also focussed on the concepts of instrumentality and integrativeness (Gardner, 1985), in which the findings showed that the Malaysian students were instrumentally motivated rather than integratively motivated toward learning English (Wong, 2011; Muftah & Rafic-Galea, 2013).

However, the field of motivation research has advanced considerably from Deci and Ryan's (1985) theories of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, and Gardner's (1985) motivation theories which were rooted in the principles of integrativeness have been seen as less significant for understanding motivation. A new model has been developed by Dörnyei (2009), and at this stage, there is almost no studies in Malaysia using this new model. Therefore, this current study seeks to investigate Malaysian students' motivation by using Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System.

Objective

This paper aims at presenting students' motivation in the light of Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System. The primary objective of this study is to investigate the motivation patterns of first year Malaysian university students in learning English as a second language.

The L2 motivational self-system

The L2 motivational self-system model was developed by Dörnyei (2009) based on Dörnyei and Csizér's (2002) large-scale longitudinal investigation of Hungarian students learning foreign languages, which focussed on self-discrepancy theory, a discrepancy between the actual and possible selves (Higgins, 1987), and the concept of integrativeness studied by Gardner (1985). This new developed model is constructed of three main features: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self and the L2 learning experience.

First is the ideal L2 self, which represents an ideal image of what the L2 learner desires to be in the future. For example, if a learner wants to be a fluent L2 user who interacts with international friends, then the imaginary picture of one's self as a fluent L2 user might act as a powerful motivator to reduce the discrepancy between the actual self and this ideal image (Dörnyei, 2005). Second is the ought-to L2 self, which refers to the attributes that one believes one ought to possess as a result of perceived duties, obligations, or responsibilities (Dörnyei, 2005). For example, a person wants to learn an L2 in order to live up to the expectations of his or her boss or teacher. The third dimension is the L2 learning experience which is concerned with the learners' attitudes toward second language learning and can be affected by situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience (Dörnyei, 2005).

A number of researchers have confirmed the validity of the L2 motivational self-system since it was first introduced (Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009). These studies have largely confirmed the constructs of the model, and new components have been added into the L2 motivational self-system to identify and define other motivational factors that may influence language learning; for instance, parental/family influence has been added to the L2 motivational self-system and it has been found to be significantly correlated with the ought-to L2 self (Csizér and Kormos, 2009). Ryan (2009) in his study in Japan has added the construct of integrativeness, and it was found to be significantly correlated with the ideal L2 self. Further, the construct of instrumentality was added and measured in two aspects: the promotion and the prevention in the studies by Taguchi et al. (2009) in Japan, China and Iran. On one hand, the instrumentality (promotion) refers to the students' internalized reasons that have a promotion focus for learning a target language; for example, learning English as a means for getting a good job, making a lot of money, going on to further studies or attaining higher social status (Dörnyei, 2005). On the other hand, the instrumentality (prevention) relates to the students' reasons that have a prevention focus for learning a language, such as studying English to avoid failure in English tests or getting poor marks in the English course (Dörnyei, 2005). Another component that was considered important to learner's motivation which is criterion measures, has also been included in some studies (Taguchi et al., 2009). The criterion measures ties to the students' experiences in L2 learning, relating to their previous success in learning, their learning environment, their teachers, their peers and the syllabus (Dörnyei, 2005).

As can be seen above, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) has introduced a more complex model in understanding motivation that involves a number of different facets (the ideal L2 self, and the ought-to L2 self, instrumentality (promotion), instrumentality (prevention), family influence, integrativeness, and criterion measures). Although several studies have tested the L2 motivational self-system in various learning environments (Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009); nevertheless, there is almost nothing about this model in Malaysia. Therefore, this study has adapted Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System in identifying the students' motivation in learning English as a second language in Malaysia as it is a more comprehensive model.

Methodology

This study uses quantitative research methods employing a survey research design. Since this paper focuses only on the Malaysian students' motivation to learning English, therefore, the instrument used in this study was adapted from the scales described in section 2.0. They are: the ideal

L2 self, and the ought-to L2 self, instrumentality (promotion), instrumentality (prevention), family influence, integrativeness, and criterion measures. Due to the different population with which the instrument is used, a few minor changes have been made. Firstly, this study modifies the questionnaire by deleting items that are not relevant to the Malaysian context. A survey item on English in the Malaysian context was added to the questionnaire to look specifically at this construct for the Malaysian students. Thus, the questionnaire consisted of 36 statement type items which belong to eight scales in measuring students' motivation and attitudes in the Malaysian context. Each statement in the questionnaire was scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' (Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Neutral=3, Agree=4, Strongly agree=5).

The sample for this study was selected from first year students in *Universiti Malaysia Kelantan* (UMK), Malaysia. A total of 190 first year students participated in the study. The participants were from different academic majors and they were non-English major students. The participants were also selected from students with Band 1 and Band 2 on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), that is, those who were the lowest achievers in English upon university entrance. These students need at least Band 3 on MUET to fulfil graduation requirements.

Prior to the data analysis, all 36 statement items in the questionnaire were carefully categorized into their respective scales. Before beginning the analysis, a reliability test was conducted for each scale. Overall, the mean inter-item correlation (above .20) of the L2 motivational scales were within the acceptable values to show the data was reliable (Briggs & Cheek, 1986). This shows that these scales are sufficiently reliable to be used in the context of this study in Malaysia. Following the reliability test, the students responses were statistically analysed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics involving mean, frequency and standard deviation were carried out on the scales to identify the types of motivation that influence the students in their language learning. A higher mean score for a particular scale may indicate that the factor measured by the scale is a more important motivational factor in learning English for the participants of the study. It suggests that most of the participants agreed that the items in the scale might influence their motivation to learn English in Malaysia. On the other hand, a low mean score indicates that only a few participants agreed with the items in the scale, suggesting that the factor measured by the scales with lower mean scores are less important motivational factors for the participants taken as a group.

Findings and Discussion

In general, the results of the present study suggest that the participants in this study seem to be influenced by a number of external and internal factors in their motivation in learning English. The standard deviation of these scales were somewhat varied, they were generally within about .50 of the mean. *Family influence* and *instrumentality (promotion)* were the only standard deviations outside the range of .40 to .60, and these two standard deviations will be discussed below with their respective scales. A summary of the descriptive statistics is presented in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1
Summary of Mean Scores for Motivational Scales

Scales	Mean Scores	Std. Deviation
English in the Malaysian context (motivation)	4.30	0.45
Instrumentality (prevention)	4.23	0.54
Ought-to-L2 self	4.15	0.52
Integrativeness	4.12	0.56
Ideal L2 self	4.00	0.51
Family influence	3.77	0.61
Instrumentality (promotion)	3.70	0.33
Criterion measures	3.66	0.49

Firstly, the most important motivational factor in learning English for the participants of this study was *English in the Malaysian context (motivation)*, with a mean score of 4.30. This particular

scale measures the participants' responses on items that connect to the importance of learning English in Malaysia, generally for communication with fellow Malaysians, education, business and employment. The Malaysian students' responses to this scale seem to indicate that the importance of English in Malaysia especially for communication, tertiary education and job entry is the most motivating factor in the learning of the language in Malaysia. This result could be explained by the fact that English is the language used in the private sector and some parts of the governmental sector in Malaysia (Ting, & Mahadhir, 2009). English also functions as the language of business and trade especially for companies with international links (Phan Le Ha, Kho, & Chng, 2013). Further, English is the language used in tertiary education to access latest knowledge advancement which is available in English (Ting, & Mahadhir, 2009). It is thus of particularly high importance for Malaysian students to learn English because of its economic and social benefits. Further, these students are enrolled in a variety of fields such as business, arts and design, veterinary medicine, geology and agriculture technology and they will need English in all these professional fields to be successful. Therefore, these students are motivated to learn because of the need of English to prepare them for their future careers.

The *instrumentality (prevention)* scale was identified as the second most important motivational factor in learning English for the participants of this study, with a mean score of 4.23 (Table 5.1). The *instrumentality (prevention)* scale measures the participants' sense of obligations, duties or fears in learning English. This could relate to these students' motives to learn English with a prevention focus; to learn in order not to fail the course. The result of this scale suggests that a strongly motivating factor for these Malaysian university students learning English is their worry that there may be potentially harmful consequences resulting from unsuccessful English learning, such as a lack of job offers or an inability to graduate from the university. Further, this finding suggests that these students are worried about the social pressures to learn English (sense of obligations and duties).

Another important motivational factor that influences the Malaysian students' motivation to learn English is the *ought-to-L2 self* with a relatively high mean score of 4.15. This scale particularly assessed the participants' responses on items that relate to the importance of learning English in order to gain the approval of others, to become an educated person and to gain respect from others. The finding shows that the participants for this study seem to study English because its importance has been stressed by other people in the society. These students at UMK may believe that learning English and getting good scores will give them the approval that they want; being recognized as successful learners, which later will garner prestige for themselves and those people in their surroundings. The finding also seems to suggest that these Malaysian students were motivated to learn English in order to become an educated person and to gain respect from others. These students appear to believe that being proficient in English is important to present their image as an educated professional to society. They may believe that the lack of English knowledge would affect their future social image which may lead to disrespect from the society.

Looking at the above findings, it seems that these students at UMK were strongly influenced by external factors in their language learning. The results show that the Malaysian students in this study are motivated to learn English because they need English to graduate, to be marketable in the employment field, and thus able to get the jobs that they want and that correspond to their education. These students are also motivated to learn English for the respect that results from successful English learning.

However, the participants' responses to the scale *integrativeness*, with a mean score of 4.12 (Table 5.1), suggest that there are also internal factors that influence their English learning. *Integrativeness* motivation in this study assessed the interest the students have toward the English culture and its speakers, as well as the students' desire to become similar to the people who speak English. *Integrativeness* is often understood as relating to countries outside the one being studied, but in this study, it could actually be related to the Malaysian context as well. In thinking of 'English speaking people' in this study, the students may think of Australians, Americans or English, or else of Malaysians who speak only English or primarily English, either in their everyday life or in their professional setting. These students may have the desire to make friends with those Malaysians who speaks English in Malaysia and they might want to become similar to those people. Malaysian English speakers are always considered as being modern and trendy in Malaysia, therefore the Malaysian students at UMK may wish to participate in this community. These students may feel that

they are up to date and classy if they become similar or identify with the Malaysian English speaking society, as well as with English speakers outside Malaysia.

The Malaysian students' motivation to learn English is also influenced by their *ideal L2 self*, with a mean score of 4.00 (Table 5.1). The *ideal L2 self* refers to the aspect of one's ideal image that one wants to become (Dörnyei, 2005). Dörnyei (2005) further asserted that the *ideal L2 self* could be an influential motivating factor provided the person one inspires to become is proficient in the L2. In this sense, the result indicates that these students are motivated to learn English by their imagined futures as fluent and successful L2 speakers. These students may want to be sufficiently proficient to enable them to communicate with people who speak English or to be able to use English in their daily life or at workplace.

Three remaining scales, which are *family influence*, *instrumentality (promotion)* and *criterion measures*, had mean values below 4, and the factors connected with these three scales appear to be less important in the students' motivation to learn English. *Family influence* with a mean score of 3.77 seems to have some influence on the participants' motivation to learn English. *Family influence* assessed parental effects on the participants' language learning, in terms of whether, for example, they might learn English because of encouragement from their parents and family members, or to avoid their parents being disappointed in them. The finding suggests that the students in this study overall do not think of *family influence* as one of the highly important factors motivating them to learn English. Given that these students are non-English major students and they are taking English as a compulsory subject in a course, it may be the case that the parents or family members of the participants in this study may motivate them to achieve in their education generally, but this does not necessarily apply specifically to English. They do not therefore see *family influence* as specifically influencing their motivation to learn English.

The findings of this study also suggest that *instrumentality (promotion)* is a relatively less important factor in these students' motivation to learn English, with a mean score of 3.70. *Instrumentality (promotion)* is associated with the students' hopes, goals and accomplishments in their future; they study English because they desire to get a good job, make a lot of money, go on to further studies or attain higher social status. The finding suggests that these Malaysian students do not consider this scale as an important factor in motivating them to learn English. It seems that *instrumentality (prevention)* is more important than *instrumentality (promotion)* for these students. This may be explained by the fact that these students are among the low achieving students and they need to achieve at least Band 3 MUET in order for them to graduate, and that their motivation is not strongly internalized. Since these students are less successful in the English course so far, they are perhaps most strongly focused on the need to learn English to avoid problems; to graduate from the university or to become successful after graduation. Thus, it is obvious that these external motivations are their main concern, internal motivations for learning English is much less important for these students.

Lastly, *criterion measures* is scored by the Malaysian students as the least important factor influencing their motivation to learn English, with a mean of only 3.66. The *criterion measures* refer to the students' experience of learning a second language, relating to their learning environment such as their experiences of success, their teachers, their peers, and the curriculum. This result indicates that the students did not consider their learning experiences as important as other factors in motivating them to learn English because English is a requirement. They need to learn English as it is a compulsory subject in the university, and they must pass an English language proficiency test in order to fulfill the graduation requirements. Thus, experiences of English may have less influence on their motivations to learn. Moreover, these students are the low achievers in English so far, thus they have limited prior success in language learning that can contribute to their motivation.

Conclusion

The present study reveals that the Malaysian students are largely influenced by external factors in learning English. This is obvious from the results of this study in which many of the L2 motivational scales which had higher mean scores, above 4, are those which refer to external motivations. These low achieving students are motivated to learn English because of the importance of English for their future education and careers. It is undeniable that English is highly valued in any

field of expertise, and being competent in English will provide the students with a brighter future. It is of high importance that these students will get good grades in English course as it will increase their opportunities of better job or higher education after they graduate.

The results also underline the obvious consequences of failure in learning English which can jeopardize these students' future chances in employment or education, and this perhaps explains why most of the participants had high responses to the external factors. Also, given that the participants for this study are the low achieving Malaysian students, and therefore are at risk of not being able to graduate from their course, they have a very strong external reason to learn the language. These students do not have any choice but to learn and become proficient in the English language in order to succeed in their educational life at university and subsequently in their employment once they graduate, and the results of the current study would seem to reflect this.

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