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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Qualitative Phenomenological Investigation of Pre-university English as a Second Language Learners' Experiences in Malaysia

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| ABSTRACT

This research study explicitly analyses pre-university learners' individual learning experiences of English as a second language in a public university in Malaysia. In an attempt to gauge participants' individual learning experiences, this study drew from Skinner's (1957) behaviourism, Krashen's (2020) nonnative language acquisition and Vygotsky's (1974) sociocultural theories of learning. The behaviourism theory puts forth that learning a second language is a mechanical process which relies heavily on habit formation (Skinner, 1957). Krashen's (2020) nonnative language acquisition and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theories, on the other hand, posit that a new language is naturally and effortlessly acquired through social interactions that require cognitive reasoning (Vygotsky, 1978). The qualitative findings received from one to one unstructured interviews were analysed in relation to the aforesaid theories. The findings revealed that informants studied English for university admission and that their sociocultural environment inhibited them from speaking the language outside the classroom. Discerning that the conventional teaching of English would not help them to attain their goal, informants though asserted to experience a drop in motivation throughout their English course, established an artificial linguistic environment for them to receive comprehensible inputs of English from various sources. Four out of five informants affirmed their preference to learn English in English speaking nations to be able to practice English in the wider community, while one underlined his/her preference for non-English speaking nations due to the fear of having difficulties in understanding accented English and of being laughed for his/her poor command English by native English speakers. Frequent addition of the linguistic suffix 'lah' from Bahasa Malaysia was added to standard English by local informants, leading to the creation of a hybrid landscape. Pedagogical implications for second language teaching and learning are raised alongside a revision of the structure, content and teaching strategies of existing English as a second language course.

| KEYWORDS

English as a second language, Pre-university students, language teaching and learning, socio-cultural environment

1. Introduction

A significant increase in English language learners (ELL) in several non-English speaking nations has been observed since the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century (Crystal, 2000, 2003; Mufwene, 2015). Rajagopalan (2008, p. 209) describes the swift expansion of English in the aforestated centuries as a 'wildfire' which springs up, as Snowden (2012, p. 89) claims, like a 'mushroom'. Supporting the above statements, Widdowson (1994), Canagarajah (2007) and Seidlhofer (2011) put forth their research findings showcasing that the existing number of non-native English speakers outnumbered that of English natives, and this highlights the idea that the latter can no longer claim sole ownership of English (Crystal, 2012). English, as asserted by Crystal (2007) and Mufwene (2015), occupies the status of a global/international language which is massively used by nonnatives across the world. Crystal (1997) underlines the significance of grasping English given that 85% of the world's international

consortium, film productions, markets and the internet prefer using English, and 90% of academic journals are written and published in English. To Mufwene (2015), English spreads its tentacles across various non-English speaking countries and is the language choice of numerous specialist environments due to globalisation.

A firm grasp of English is evidenced to provide easy access to education and employment opportunities to its speakers (Shoro, 2018). Despite the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO,1953) encourages non-English speaking nations to use their mother-tongue in early education, numerous governments and policymakers from the African and Asian continents such as Singapore, Senegal, and Kenya opt for English over their mother tongues as the language of education, providing the absent link between their mother-tongues and economic advancement as the reason (Mazrui, 1997; Lee, 2000; Numan, 2003). Mazrui's (1997) research underlined the use of English in education as the rational choice due to various socioeconomic and educational benefits associated with it, while Lee (2000) attested that English being part of Singapore's educational policy is the prime reason for its blossoming economic success in the South East regions. The use of English in early education in Singapore and its reported success (Lee, 2000; Aramainsthan, 1970) can be said to challenge UNESCO's (1953) proposition of using mother-tongues in early education in non-English speaking nations. Malaysia, being the neighbouring country of Singapore, gives English the status of a second language which is used both formally and informally in primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions (Akcay et al., 2015; Shah et al., 2017). Like the former prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kwan Yew, who attributed its nation's success at all levels to the mastery of English by its population (Lee, 2000), Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, the former deputy prime minister of Malaysia claimed that the government's priority was to make Malaysians proficient in English to foster nation building (Thirusanku and Yunus, 2014). Malaysia's education blueprint plan for 2013-2015 sent 6100 primary and secondary English teachers to be retrained with new innovative skills and methods to teach English (Blueprint, 2015; Sidhu et al., 2018). This demonstrates the government's determination to promote English in schools and ensure that the future workforce is proficient in English. My observation, nonetheless, underlines an absence between the teaching and learning of ESL and the social environment in higher education in Malaysia, and this is what drives me to research this topic.

A coherent theoretical explanation of how ESL is successfully acquired by nonnatives in non-English speaking nations is Krashen's (1982, 1985, 2020) 'Input Hypothesis', which stipulates that the mastery of any nonnative language requires learners to go through the process of comprehending the language first. The comprehending process calls for learners to either listen or read the language because the linguistic input acquired from listening and reading exposes them to both the written and spoken forms of the language, hence, making it easier for them to understand its patterns and create meanings of them (Krashen, 2020). This shows that contextualization of the language is what drives its acquisition. Hashim and Yunus (2018) studied a secondary mix race school which is widely known for forming fluent English speakers in Malaysia and found the participants to be attributing their effective command of English to the school environment where teachers-teachers and teachers-students speak English among themselves in/outside the classroom. The aforementioned researchers' observations highlight that every corner of the school was decorated with English vocabulary and phrases, and once per week, the students were engaged in a reading routine requiring them to read any English material for five minutes before their class began. Applying Krashen's (2020) theory to Hashim and Yunus's (2018) study demonstrated that the participants were proficient English speakers because the linguistic input received was one step ahead of their existing competency level in English, and they were motivated to make sense of the new linguistic input. That is to say, for second language acquisition to be possible, exposure to ESL should follow Krashen's (2020) formula, 'i+1', the 'I' representing ESL's current proficiency level and the '1' referring to raw linguistic inputs that are slightly above ESL's existing proficiency level which is achieved either by talking to someone who speaks better English just like the participants in the above-referred research talked to their teachers or by reading.

Motivation is documented to be very significant in second language acquisition. Krashen (2020) explored a concept named an 'affective filter' in his theory, whereby he asserted that when a learner is comfortable and relaxed, his/her filter is low and linguistic input flows in easily and is desirably processed. However, when a learner experiences feelings of demotivation, fear and anxiety, his/her affective filter is high, which ultimately clogs new input receptions, hence, hindering acquisition. Sharing similar thoughts, Gardner (1985) affirmed that learners need to have positive perceptions, motivations and acceptance to be part of the language community in order to grasp it, and this is what Gardner (1985) terms as integrative orientation. Instrumental orientation, on the contrary, refers to extrinsic reasons for which learners learn a second language (Gardner, 1985). In contrast to Hashim and Yunus's (2018) findings, Ting et al.'s (2017) and Cole et al.'s (2015) studies showcased that Malaysian students were very shy and scared to communicate in English even with their peers. To Al Hosni (2014) and Al Ansari (2015), Malaysian students experienced speaking anxiety, a condition which describes ESL learners' feeling frustrated, demotivated, and anxious to speak English due to their low performance. Also, Al Hosni's (2014) and Al Ansari's (2015) research highlighted that Malaysian students do not speak English outside the classroom for fear of being negatively viewed by others as casting aside the Malay culture, language, and identity and adopting the Westernized ones represented by English. The environment can therefore be said to influence ESL acquisition.

The scant research conducted on the investigated phenomenon in Malaysia, the contrasting findings received from former research and my individual observations propelled me to research this topic to yield raw data and convert them into fresh insights. This

research study, therefore, aims to fill in gaps in the literature by providing rich, detailed information on pre-university students' individual experiences of ESL in Malaysia and thus, the following research question is formulated:

I.   What are the experiences of pre-university students learning English as a second language in a public university in Malaysia?

And the sub questions are:

(I)   How far do the employed pedagogical strategies to teach English as a second language proficiently develop the participants' language skills, notably listening, reading, writing and speaking in a Malaysian public university?
(II)   To what extent does the absence of social exchanges between the students and their social milieu influence their mastery of English as a second language?
(III)   How far do students' existing experiences of learning English as a second language in non-speaking English backgrounds keep them motivated to learn English?

The following section briefly presents the traditional v/s constructivism language learning theories.

2. Behaviorism v/s the sociocultural theory of learning

Second language acquisition (SLA) is defined as the study of a nonnative language in either a natural environment or a classroom (Miao, 2015). The past few decades have witnessed several discussions on how SLA occurs (Liang, 2013). To the behaviourists, namely Bruner (1986), Skinner (1957), and Lightbown and Spada (1999), SLA happens when learners constantly practice the same language text and form until they master it. Likewise, learners repeat words they hear until they memorise and include them in their everyday interactions (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Language learning, from this perspective, appears to be a mechanical process relying heavily on habit formation. Learning a new language, according to this school of thought, requires teachers to involve students in repetition, drills, memorization and rote exercises, which ought to be followed by reinforcement; that is, learners should be positively rewarded for providing correct answers (Brooks, 1960; Lightbown and Spada, 1999). To Demirezen (1988), it is positive reinforcement that motivates learners to practice the next set of questions. On the other hand, teachers give negative rewards in terms of punishment to students who give incorrect answers, and this leads to negative reinforcement whereby learners may feel demotivated or embarrassed to perform upcoming tasks. The behaviourist theory of learning has nonetheless been criticized by Chomsky (1968), who underlined the abstract nature of linguistic knowledge as incapable of being acquired through extensive repetition and imitation. Chomsky (1968) highlighted that behaviourism does not demonstrate how constant repetition and imitation exercises are transferred to interaction.

To the socio-cultural theory of learning, interaction with the social environment is essential for SLA (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory believes that learning is 'embedded within social events and occurring as an individual interacts with people, objects, events in the environment' (Cook, 2008, pp. 54). SLA can therefore be said to arise from the process of interaction, meaning making and negotiation in cooperative activities with experts or those possessing varying language knowledge and skills in a given culture (Vygotsky, 1978). The cognitive and communicative functions that learners perform in social exchanges are what develop their cognition and higher forms of reasoning (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf and Thorne, 2007). Nonetheless, learners' learning potentials are fully reached when they are guided by a knowledgeable other who mediates what's next to learn (Vygotsky, 1978). The next learning task may present content that lies in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), that is, one step ahead of learners' actual development level and hence would require the assistance, guidance and scaffolded supports of a more knowledgeable other for learners to successfully complete tasks. Upon task completion and learners' mastery of it, the ZPD changes, presenting tougher tasks that again require learners to be assisted in performing successfully (Vygotsky, 1978). Operating within learners' ZPDs, that is, with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other, allows learners to interact with their environment on a more intricate and competent level.

Applying Vygotsky's (1978) theory to the classroom requires teachers to set learning tasks that tap into both learners' actual development stage, that is, what the latter can do independently and the ZPD stage, whereby learners require assistance to perform tasks (Karpov and Haywood, 1998). Greenfield (1984) and Wood et al. (1976) proposed teachers plan cooperative activities involving learners of different abilities who can aid each other in learning and provide scaffolded instructions by dropping hints and prompts at different levels in the ZPD stage alongside their gradual intervention to assist students in completing the task effectively. The 'graduated intervention of the teacher' should not simplify the task but rather simplify the role of the learner (Greenfield, 1984, pp.119). The aim, as Spector (1992) affirmed, is to provide a scaffold to aid learners in moving from assisted to unassisted accomplishment of tasks. Socio-cultural theorists claimed that SLA could be practiced through social activities like role playing, story-telling, think-aloud that promote the cultural context of the language (Vygotsky, 1978; Swain, 2000). Palinscar (2013) suggested using reciprocal instruction to teach reading comprehension, within which learners learn in close collaboration with more knowledgeable peers who aid them in developing understanding skills. Likewise, Brown and her ally (National Academy of Sciences, 2018) introduced a learning method known as the 'community of learners' model' whereby learners-adults and learners-

learners learn together collaboratively in shared tasks with more knowledgeable learners helping the less knowledgeable ones through their social exchanges. The teacher in this approach uses scaffolding and intervenes to provide assistance when needed. However, Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning has been criticized for not explicitly explaining the application of ZPD in the classroom (Shayer, 2002). To Lambert and Clyde (2000), the ZPD provides a limited view of learning processes where learners may adopt a passive role relying heavily on teachers for task completion. Additionally, Piaget (1995) claimed that while learning in groups, the more knowledgeable peers may dominate the learning process and neglect the struggling learners.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural and Krashen's (2020) SLA theories of learning share the same perspective about SLA. Both contend that the development of humans' intellectual and mental faculties occurs from social exchanges and through the latter's engagement in group tasks necessitating phrenic and interactive functions. As can be seen, these two theories are in contrast to the behaviourism theory of language learning. Nonetheless, the three theories are considered to be the appropriate grounding for this study; the informants claimed to learn English traditionally, that is, through the behaviorist approach, while the Malaysian government, its established educational policies alongside the literature, argue for the adoption of the constructivist approach. An examination of the informants' experiences entails a cross analytical investigation of the effectiveness of the aforestated approaches in SLA.

3. Method

This study was conducted in a public university in Malaysia, and the participants were purposively chosen due to the information they held (Robinson, 2014). Participants 'consent forms were sent to fifteen undergraduates learning ESL, and only five responded positively. Brief profiling of the participants is as follows:

Table 1: Participants' profile

Participant	Age	Nationality
1	20	Malaysian
2	21	Malaysian
3	21	Malaysian
4	21	Malaysian
5	19	Malagasy

Unstructured interview as a qualitative research method was used to gauge participants' individual experiences, inner perceptions, feelings and motivations in learning ESL at their university. Each interview lasted for about thirty minutes and was verbally transcribed to generate themes. An excerpt of this is illustrated below:

Excerpt 1: Themes generated from the individual transcription of Participant 1:

1 Interview Questions	2 Super-ordinate (keywords of the question)	3 Sub-ordinate (Main points from conversation)	4 Elaboration (Verbal example)	5 Occurrence (Main ideas transferred as keywords to support the sub-ordinate) 3
1.What is the prime reason for you to learn English as a second language?	Why learning ESL?	Learning English because it is a mandatory requirement of the university.	'Since I was a kids, I dunno why to learn English but when I enter university.. I know the English is mandatory for everybody..I learn English to communicate to people.. at least I could speak and read.. don't want to learn English advance level' '10% of my daily life, I speak English...my friends...some of them are from other countries'	Learning ESL for external factors

Pseudonyms were used to preserve participants' anonymity, and permissions were received from participants to quote and present their given information in this study. After themes were generated for each interview question for each participant, an analysis of each generated theme for each of the five transcripts was done to underline similarities and differences. Themes were then grouped under signposts to keep readers focused on the individual responses of participants on each point discussed in the interview. To exemplify this, an excerpt is shown below:

Excerpt 2: Generating theme

IQ 1: What is the prime reason for you to learn ESL?	Informant 1	Informant 2	Informant 3	Informant 4	Informant 5	Main Theme
	Learning ESL for better job opportunities education	Learning ESL to find opportunities in private/educational sectors	Learning ESL to get admission in an international university	Learning ESL because it is mandatory for university	Learning ELS because it is a requirement of the university	Learning ESL for external/extrinsic reasons.

This task was performed for each interview question considering the five participants' input, and hence, the following themes were created:

Interview Question:	Themes generated
1	Learning ESL for extrinsic reason
2	Quick grasp of English in learning ESL in English speaking countries
3	Individual difficulties
4	Widening one exposure in English in non-English speaking nations
5	Teaching ESL traditionally
6	Teaching English in L1 and in English
7	Participants' perceptions of mastery level attained
8	Link between classroom and reality
9	Low motivation for learning ESL

Post this task, some of the generated themes were observed to be linked to one another and were therefore combined under one signpost. A perusal of the generated themes for further combining resulted as follows:

1. *Extrinsic motivation for learning ESL (combining interview question 1 and 9)*

2. *The link between ESL and social environment from participants' perceptions (combining interview question 2, 3, 4)*

3. *Participants' individual experiences with the teaching and learning process of ESL within the classroom (combining interview question 5, 6, 7, 8)*

Once the signposts were generated, they underwent the inter-rater reliability process whereby another rater, in this research study, an academic, re-reviewed the raw findings collected to rate, code and assess data to see if similar themes and signposts were spawned. The academic came up with similar themes and signposts though worded differently. Below is an excerpt of the academic's and the researcher's report:

Excerpt 3: Similarities between the rater and researcher's report

Rater: Theme: Learning ESL for external factors/low motivation	Signpost: External motivation for learning ESL
Researcher: Theme: Learning ESL for extrinsic reasons/Low motivation for learning ESL	Extrinsic motivation for learning ESL

The above excerpt showcases the agreement between the subjective ratings of the researcher and the rater and hence, is a means for the researcher to 'mitigate interpretive bias (Walther et al., 2013, pp.650). After this task, the signposts were analysed in relation to the literature, and explicit details of this are given in the following section.

4. Findings and Discussions
4:1: Extrinsic motivation for learning ESL

The research subjects in this study asserted to be learning ESL for extrinsic reasons. An excerpt of their responses is provided below:

Excerpt 4: Participants' Learning English for external reasons

Informant 1	Informant 2	Informant 3	Informant 4	Informant 5
Learning ESL for better job opportunities education	Learning ESL to find opportunities in private/educational sectors	Learning ESL to get admission in an international university	Learning ESL because it is mandatory for university	Learning ELS because it is a requirement of the university

The above excerpt showcases the underlying reasons why the five respondents were learners of ESL at their university. The requirement of the University to possess sound English language skills alongside that of workplaces is the external stimulus or pressure that propels the respondents to learn ESL. Saleh and Murtaza's (2017) and Zarina et al.'s (2020) studies showcased that English is the most used language in public and private job spheres in Malaysia. Added to this, Najeeb (2013) and Barkhuizen (2011) asserted that employers are likely to hire individuals who possess a firm mastery of English. The external stimulus or pressure is widely known in the literature as extrinsic motivation, and by definition, extrinsic motivation refers to psychological behaviour that is driven by external rewards (Cherry, 2018; Weiner, 2000). This demonstrates that the participants constructed their identities in relation to learning ESL and the fortuity of securing university admission and successful career development.

According to Ryan and Deci (1999), learners can do extrinsically motivated tasks with indignation, resistance and disinterest. When asked if they were still motivated to learn ESL, three participants responded with 'No', claiming that they were learning ESL because they had to, while the other two responded with 'Yes'. Note worthily, all of them affirmed that they would not have learned ESL if it would not have been a university criterion. Below is an excerpt of their assertions:

Excerpt 5: Participants' Motivation to Learn ESL

Are you still motivated to learn English?	No.	Not motivated to continue in learning ESL	Yes'	Yes'	No	

(I) Have you ever thought of enrolling in an English course prior starting university?	Informant 1: Not at all. I would have not do this. We learn it because we have to.	No..No.. Now, we have to learn it.	Hmm, no (giggling) it would not necessitate me	No, I will not. Now the university want us to learn it, so we learn it. By myself, not.	No. I would not need English then, why would I learn English?

The above excerpts demonstrated that the participants' extrinsic motivation grew weaker or can even be said to reach the zero motivational level throughout the ESL course progression. The two participants who claimed to be still motivated to learn ESL appear confused because, in their elaborations, they spoke about the inutility of learning English if it would not have been a university criterion. Reading excerpt 5 in light of Ryan and Deci's (2000, pp. 54) definition of motivated learners as 'energised and

activated towards the end', the participants' non-energetic and unenthusiastic behaviours demonstrate that they are demotivated to learn ESL. In response, Hajhashemi et al. (2017) asserted that ESL learners lose motivation because they cannot see a link between English and its significance in their daily lives. It seems, though, as affirmed by Ting et al. (2017) and Al Hosni (2014), English is used in solely confined contexts such as education and workplaces and is not the language that is widely spoken and heard in the streets of Malaysia. Choosing to speak English over Bahasa Malaysia in the public sphere is negatively perceived by the community members as adopting the Western culture, values, beliefs, and identity and an attempt to desert the native language, culture and identity (Ansari, 2015; Lee Su Kim, 2003). In corroboration of this, one participant asserted that '*I can speak no English outside, my friends will laugh at me, they will say I am not Malaysian. I am international*'. This participant's assertion exemplifies that socio-cultural environment hinders him/her from speaking English outside the classroom. Speaking English in the public domain would result in their exclusion from the Malaysian community and association with the international community. They, as attested by Lee Su Kim (2003, pp.28-39), would be perceived as the 'other' and 'less Malay'. Assimilating English is linked with the fear of losing one's own culture and language (Clement and Kruidenier, 1985). Language, as demonstrated in the above assertion, plays a significant role in Malaysia in connecting one to his/her culture, identity and belief (Ansari, 2015). To Papi and Abdollahzadeh (2012), learners of ESL lose interest in English when they fail to see the practical reason for learning the language despite its insignificant impact on their community. When questioned, the participants asserted that they were learning English to use it only in particular situations like '*university studies' 'doing assignments', 'reading university books'*, and one asserted that '*when I get a job lah, I will speak English that I learn now lah, and with my Malay friends at work, I'll speak Malay lah, the English I know lah, is enough la'.* From the assertions, it is clear that the participants knew that they would be using English for limited purposes and like in Zhia's (2015) research, the participants in this study, though acknowledging the necessity to learn ESL, feel no need to assimilate its grammatical linguistic features in their utterances. When scrutinizing the English language that the participants speak, the word 'la', which is used as a suffix in Bahasa Malaysia, can be seen to have been transferred to their version of English with the addition of 'lah' at the end of each of their utterances. In actual fact, the word 'la' is also observed to be widely used in the three other Malaysian participants' discourses:

> '*I don't know English a lot lah*' (participant 2)

> '*I prefer learning English la... in English speaking nations lah*' (participant 3)

> '*I think English speaking nations better lah*' (participant 4)

According to the participants, the word 'lah' is used to show emphasis and add a personal touch to their utterances. This aligns with Goddart's (1994, pp.148) research findings which showcased that Malaysians used the suffix 'lah' to provide a 'softening effect' to their words/phrases/sentences. Moreover, the participants in his study claimed that without the word 'lah', their speeches would appear to be 'blunt' and 'confrontational'. The word 'lah' can hence be said to be a linguistic suffix that Malaysians imported from their native language to English, creating their own version of English, which ultimately leads to linguistic hybridity. The localized Malaysian English and its functionality showcases Malaysians' interest in preserving their cultural linguistic heritage. Lin et al.'s (2018) study also exemplified Malaysian tertiary students' great positive attitudes towards Malaysian English. Being demotivated to continue learning ESL, the participants, as claimed by Krashen (2020), had a high affective filter which is an unfavourable condition that hinders language acquisition.

4:2: Language exposure and acquisition

Four out of five participants preferred learning ESL in English speaking countries due to the following reasons:

Excerpt 6: Participants' preference to learn ESL in English speaking nations.

Participant 1	'English speaking nations. I'll learn new words lah because I'll talk to people lah, there will be only English lah, I'll learn more. Everyone speaks English there lah, I can too lah, nobody will say anything wrong, I think in English speaking nations lah, I'll practice English more than in Malaysia'
Participant 2	'I don't know English a lot lah, but I prefer to learn English in English speaking nations lah. I think it would be better for me lah, I will learn new words from friends there la and will speak without fear lah, no one will judge me lah. I will still be Malaysian (giggles)'
Participant 3	'I prefer learning English in English speaking nations lah. I will learn better, new words easily, I can speak the language more'
Participant 5	'I am from Madagascar, here, I speak English, only English with my friends. But, I would prefer English speaking nations because my friends here don't speak good English. I want to improve. They speak one word one word, I understand, but in English speaking countries like England, I would speak English with people who know more, it would be easier for me to learn English than in Malaysia'

Based on the four participants' responses and a significant body of literature on SLA, the above responses underline the effect of the social environment, particularly the linguistic nature of a social/cultural context, on language acquisition (Gardner, 1985; Krashen, 2013). The participants' affirmations clearly demonstrate their belief that English speaking nations would provide them with greater opportunities to practice English in informal contexts without the fear of being misjudged or foregoing their Malaysian identity. Their assertions align with Krashen's (2013) argument of how to pick up a second language in similar fashion learners pick up their mother tongues; like the participants, Krashen (2013) believes that natural communicative input is the most significant element in language acquisition because it is through social exchanges that learners receive inputs such as new vocabularies that fits their stage of language acquisition (Jihua, 2010). Informal social exchanges are pivotal for ESL learners, for in a classroom of diverse learners, with each at a different level of linguistic competence, the selected course materials may either be steps too low or high for the learners' present linguistic development (Krashen, 2013, 2020). In excerpt 6, participant 5 asserted that he/she was unable to hone his/her English language skills because most of his/her friends spoke 'one word' English. This shows that his/her social environment is not providing him/her with the appropriate language input that is one step ahead of his/her current linguistic development (Krashen, 2013, 2020). Contrarily, his/her social environment can be said to be impinging his/her language development and mastery by exposing him/her to language input below his/her linguistic development stage. This, therefore, proves that the equation i-1 does not lead to language acquisition and corroborates Krashen's (1984, pp.79, 2011) formula 'i+1' to be true in 'picking up' a second language. Also, participants 1 and 3's assertions illustrate that their affective filters were always high because of the fear of being misjudged and tagged as non-Malaysian. A high affective filter leads to mental blocks hindering the acquisition process (Krashen, 2013). The assertion showcases that for the participant, his/her English speaking identity is not conflictual with his/her cultural/ethnic identity.

Moreover, the participants also claimed that learning ESL in English speaking nations would aid them in picking up 'new words' easily while conversing with more knowledgeable others. Social interaction, as attested by Long 1981), Picca (1996), and Gas (2013), eases language acquisition because it connects language input received from reading and auditory means to output, that is, learners' productive language skills. To Swain (1995), interaction exposes learners to comprehensible input and feedback and allows them to make modifications to their linguistic output. Nonetheless, the participants in this study, though they claimed to widen their exposure to English on their own, are less likely to practice receptive language skills in their social community, which is dominated by Bahasa Malaysia and for reasons stated in the previous section. The following illustrates the participants' assertions:

Excerpt 7: Participants' artificial linguistic environment

Participant 1: 'I read lah, English books, listen to English songs lah, play video games lah with English friends lah'
Participant 2: 'I read books, I listen to music, I talk to myself in front of the mirror'
Participant 3: 'I read books, university books lah, I changed my mobile language to English, I try to learn the words by heart'
Participant 5: 'I read some books, magazines lah, it helps me with new words,…sometimes I forget the words, sometimes I remember lah'

The excerpt highlights participants' own efforts in creating a rich linguistic situation for themselves to increase their exposure to English. All four participants mentioned reading, and to Krashen (2013), extensive reading is a means of growing exposure to vocabulary acquisition and other lexical items. Nonetheless, limited opportunities to practice the acquired vocabulary may result in the participants forgetting about the newly learned words (Kozhevnikova, 2019). The literature proves that one of the most effective ways to recall newly encountered words is either by seeing or hearing them in about seven intervals in authentic contexts (Scott Turnburry, 2002). This underlines the need for learners to have multiple exposures to words. Participant 4, on the other hand, asserted that he/she preferred studying ESL in Malaysia itself because of the following reasons:

> *'I, lah, would prefer learning English here itself, in Malaysia, in English speaking countries lah, I would not understand their English because of their accent, (pause) I would not understand. I prefer Malaysia, my country; I don't want perfect English, only to study and for work; if I speak a wrong word, they laugh at me.'*

Accented English linked with communication and comprehension difficulties seem to be the reason why Participant 4 opted to study ESL in Malaysia. His/her choice also seems to be influenced by his/her demotivation in fully grasping English and fear of being laughed at because of her poor command of English. If her affirmations, on the one hand, demonstrate her anxiety and low self-confidence, on the other hand, it is understood as Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) and Tsurutani (2012) studies showcased that ESL learners are likely to be misconstrued by native speakers. If Participant 3 thought that his affective filter would be low in English speaking nations, participant 4 thought the opposite.

4:2 Teaching ESL
The five participants in this study asserted to be taught ESL traditionally. Below is an excerpt of their assertions:

Excerpt 8: Participants' Affirmations

Participant 1:
'discover words I did not know before…it helps a lot..Not really' to activities like role playing/drama/jungled words when interviewer asked.
'Long texts and questions and we had to answer them…practice exercises, we have a textbook lah. we just have to read and understand words..we have to search..'
'they give meaning, an example in a sentence on how to use the word correctly'

Participant 2:
'for writing, um, um, the teacher use textbook and um discuss um we are given um whereby we have to read a text lah and do the exercise and lastly we have to do one essay…I don't know…we just focus on tasks where we have to do a talk show/present in google meet…lastly… play audio and we have to answer questions'
What I learn in ▇▇▇ is stories in the past, I learn about culture…'

'Talk show, I try to write a text, memorise it, and read it'

'I have friend at ▇… not really well to speak to her, my friend sometime translates to her what I want to say'

Participant 3:
'learn how countries produce electricity…I get more confident to write and speak'

'Yes, when, err, I, in my department, in a course class, I use English', I don't understand many words and ask her to explain…she uses dictionary…ask me to take a note and do a small dictionary'
'ask me to do many exercises, correct my grammar'

Participant 4:

my teacher always says that practice makes perfect…just talk, just repeat it, correct the grammar, as long as others understand, its ok. I'm not so good in writing. My teacher gives skeleton in essay, I use it, how I learn how to write essays..after I finish, the teacher corrects it in front of me'
'The teacher use the books, where to put correct verbs, prepositions, when I write I must remember..for reading, mcq questions, find answers on text, she reads, explains, interprets passages so that we can know exactly the meaning…no, she does not explain words, exercises where you look hard words meaning yourself, we must search the word..the teacher tells us to find it by ourselves'
'Talk show, forum like meeting, we write a text, read the text, not really improving speaking.. I prefer debate..'

Participant 5:

read the text and after that give us to find the answers for the questions given below…any words we do not understand we search for them on google'
'for writing they do not give us much, just strategies how to do it/speaking is more like for writing they do not give us much, just strategies how to do it/ we have talk show, communicate formally'

Excerpt 8 showcases that content instruction and explanation in English were given to the five participants through traditional teaching methods endorsed by behaviourists. Stress was laid on the participants' form of utterances whereby the latter was engaged in a conscious teaching and learning system 'about' English, and this, to Krashen (1988) and Wink (2015), inhibits

communication because when learners consciously learn about a language, their cognitive brains are likely to constantly figure out whether or not they are producing the correct output instead of concentrating on the communicative act. Alongside Krashen (1988), Schutz (2005) argued that the grammatical structures of a language are acquired through a natural, predictable order and if teachers present grammatical rules that fail to align with students' natural order of acquisition, then the latter will not grasp the explained grammatical structures. This is exemplified in the participants' utterances that though they were taught grammar explicitly through repetition, drills and memorization, they were unable to transfer the repeated exercises to their speech which consisted of grammatical errors:0

> *Participant 1: 'I can do journal ...I wrote my daily activities'*
>
> *Participant 2: '...make our English more strong'*
>
> *Participant 3: 'Since I was a kids, I dunno why to learn English'*
>
> *Participant 4: 'I learn English now, to enter university'*
>
> *Participant 5: '... because I International'*

The above assertions highlight the participants' inability to formulate phrases/sentences in grammatically correct English and corroborate Krashen's (1988) argument on grammar acquisition. To Krashen (1988), the participants' failure in transferring grammar learning inside the classroom to their speech is due to the fact that the participants were unready to receive the input at the time they were presented to them. Krashen (1988) argued that not all learners acquire grammar at the same time; some may acquire some grammatical structures at an earlier stage compared to others who may acquire them at a subsequent stage. This is why he advocates authentic interaction as the key to language acquisition for ESL learners, within which the latter receives linguistic input that is slightly above their current linguistic level. However, drawing from the participants' affirmations, it can be stated that their ESL teachers did not adopt differentiated instruction to teach the same content to students of varying abilities. When questioned about authentic communicative activities, all the participants mentioned 'a talk show' whereby they memorised information on an assigned topic and delivered it in class. Instead of providing the participants with the opportunities to develop their speaking skills, the 'talk show' seemed much more to be testing the latter's retention abilities. It can hence be said that the activities that the participants were exposed to in their ESL classroom prevented them from interacting with their social environment. Interaction, meaning-making and negotiations, the pivot elements in second language acquisition (Krashen, 2013), were missing in the participants' ESL classroom.

Furthermore, the participants asserted in excerpt 8 that they were taught English language skills traditionally. The teachers, who, according to Vygotsky (1978), should play the role of mediators simplifying the participants' role and assisting them in the ZPD, asked them to find new words meanings by themselves. Left unattended in their ZPD, the participants, as claimed by Graves (2006), might get confused if they came across homonyms or different forms of the same words. In response, Stahl and Nagy (2006) stressed the need for teachers to teach word meanings in relation to the nature of the targeted words. Beck et al. (2013) and Stahl and Fairbanks (1986) criticized the restricted effectiveness of pedagogical instructions that centered barely on a dictionary or Google search definitions. Having the incorrect definition, the participants might respond wrongly to the meanings of words and sentences, thereby hindering their ability to comprehend the readings at hand and make logical conclusions (French et al., 1995). Instead of promoting the participants' learning, the teachers' traditional instructional strategies proved to be hindering their language development. Vocabulary teaching requires teachers to explicate new words in varying contexts, give numerous exposures and encourage learners' dynamic assimilation of the exposed new words. Moreover, the participants found themselves in a passive, receptive teaching and learning process when they were taught reading and writing. A mere reading aloud and explanation of texts or providing essay schemas to participants did not entail that the teachers were teaching the latter's ZPD, that is, assisting them through scaffolded instructions in order to help them reach a higher level of development (Vygotsky, 1978). The teachers, contrarily, provided the same explanation to all students. Learning mediated by social exchanges is noted to be absent in the participants' ESL classrooms. To Vygotsky (1978) and Weaver (1988), the participants would have had rewarding teaching and learning experiences in their ESL classrooms if the content materials had been relevant and functioned in their daily lives. Past cultural tales and electricity productions failed to sustain the participants' interest and motivation:

'Participant 1: 'I would prefer other topics lah'

'Participant 2: 'For sure, I would like to have other topics. I don't like cultural stories'

'Participant 3: 'Other topics, shopping (giggles)

'Participant 4: 'Other, other, for sure'

'Participant 5: 'I did not like the stories, it was boring'

5. Conclusion

This study set out to unveil the experiences of pre-university students learning ESL in a Malaysian public university. An anatomization of the findings divulged that the university criterion is the prime external stimulus for which the subjects enrolled in an ESL course. This external stimulus is observed to dwindle throughout the ESL course progression due to the inability of the participants to experience the practical reasons for being English speakers in their sociocultural environment. They failed to establish connections between the prerequisite of grasping English to secure university admission and the usage of English in the wider community. According to them, and as corroborated by other researchers mentioned in the previous section, speaking English in the public sphere is negatively perceived by community members as an act of deserting one's local language, culture, and identity in view of adopting Western ones. Fear of being termed as 'less Malay', 'other', and 'international', the local respondents, although three out of four asserted their preference for learning ESL in English speaking countries, opted for Malay outside the classroom. They discerned that English speaking countries would provide them with fortuities to practice the productive features of English and facilitate their masteries of new words. Though restrained by their sociocultural environment from speaking English in the public sphere, the participants created an artificial linguistic landscape for themselves in their private space to increase their exposure to English. However, it is observed that the latter speak a localized version of English with the insertion of the suffix 'lah' from Malay to English words/phrases, thus, concocting a hybrid linguistic landscape. Moreover, the participants also claimed that they learned English conventionally and content that they could not relate to. This explains why the participants were unergetic and demotivated to learn ESL.

This study underlines (i) sociocultural environment, (ii) constricted language exposure and (iii) customary teaching and learning of ESL as the reasons why students are demotivated to learn English in Malaysia. The insights provided can help individuals, language schools, policy-makers to have a holistic understanding of students' poor English proficiency in Malaysia and what to prepare to respond to this real educational concern. The divulged findings can aid present ESL academics in gaining insights into how customary methods are inhibitors to learning and may act as motivators to use Vygotsky's (1978) or Krashen's (1988) pedagogical theories in their teaching practices. Besides providing fresh insights into the experiences of pre-university students learning ESL, this study informs policymakers about existing gaps in policy, curricula, and practice. The reality of learning ESL is in contrast to what the local policy and curriculum dictate it to be like (Blueprint, 2015). Nonetheless, like any research, this study as well has some limitations. Given that it is a small scale study focusing on ESL learning experiences in solely one university, its interpretations are limited, ungeneralizable, and not statistically representative. To ascertain the feasibility, validity, and reliability of the unveiled findings, the same research focus can be studied in a larger population. This study also lays the recommendation for language institutions in Malaysia to adhere to the government's protocol (Blueprint document) of teaching ESL innovatively in view of the swift evolvements in the field of linguistics, education and cognition. Intense training for ESL teachers to teach creatively, experientially, and authentically is also recommended, alongside the need for quality surveillance officers sent by government officials to observe and assess their teaching. This appears to be the only practical way to mitigate gaps between policy and practice. Suggestions also include the centrality of having a more positive outlook towards English in non-English speaking nations, and this begins with the individuals' perception of the language, which could be positively reshaped through education where ESL teachers, as suggested by Harmer (2002) provoke engagement and interest through the choice of topic, activities or linguistic content, to teach unmotivated ESL students and altering their negative perceptions to positive ones. As Harmer (2002) asserted, it is through their own behaviour in class participation, their uprightness, disposition and seriousness that teachers sway their students' attitude to learning. A redesigning of the existing ESL pre-university curriculum into one that composes creative, authentic content and realias is suggested. Further investigation is recommended in the context of experimental learning in light of theories of language constructions in society and the creation of ESL students' social identity and motivation. Stressing on constructive self-reflection, experimental learning, as showcased by Vygotsky (1978) and Krashen (2020), may evidence itself to be effective in aiding ESL students in navigating social meanings and their own altering identities as ESL speakers. Their critical self-reflection may make them unbothered about being ridiculed for speaking English in the wider community.

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