



Attitudes towards learning English as a Second Language (ESL): the case of students in a rural secondary school in Malaysia

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Abstract

Many research have been done pertaining the issue of students' attitudes towards learning English as a second language and the factors leading to these attitudes. However, very little is known about *how* these factors actually affect the students. By applying the sociocultural perspectives based on three theories (i.e., Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory, Spolsky's (1989) Model of Second Language Learning, and Gardner's (1985) Second Language Acquisition Theory) this study examines the students' attitudes towards learning English as a second language in one rural school in the country, involving 6 students from 3 different classes. There were three questions that guided this study, namely: (i) What are the rural secondary school students' attitudes towards learning the English language?; (ii) What are the sociocultural and psychological factors that contribute to the rural secondary school students' attitude towards learning the English language?; (iii) How do these sociocultural and psychological factors contribute to the rural secondary school students' attitude towards learning the English language? Working within the tradition of descriptive and exploratory qualitative research, this study employed a case study approach. A rural secondary school in a southern state in Malaysia was selected with 6 students from 3 different classes as the primary participants. These students were interviewed twice and were observed at least thrice during English lesson in the classrooms. The researchers also analysed their learning materials (i.e. their notes, exercises and homework).

Key words: Attitude, English as a Second Language (ESL), Psychological aspects, Sociocultural aspects, Rural school

Introduction

English plays a significant part in Malaysian Education system, where it is viewed as a second language as well as a language of knowledge, which can help Malaysians gain better employment and thus gain better social status. However, many students view English as a foreign language, which is spoken only during language lessons (Tom, Aiza, Awang & Siti, 2013). This is worrying because if seen as a foreign language, the students may not see the significance of mastering the English language. In addition, using the English language only during the lesson is not sufficient to develop good English users.

The low proficiency level of English among Malaysian students has a significant relationship with their negative attitudes towards learning English in school. For example, Ler (2012) claimed that English proficiency of most Malaysian students, particularly those staying in rural areas, is worrying. As English plays a significant part in Malaysian Education system, the fact that the proficiency of students in rural areas is not up to par (Jamali Ismail & Hasliza Arif, 2002) is undeniably disturbing.

In fact, many students in the country actually perceive English as a foreign language where they only use it orally during language lessons (Tom, Aiza, Awang and Siti, 2013). This strengthens the statement by Rosli Talif and Jayakaran Mukundan (1994), Jamali Ismail and Hasliza Aris (2002) that there is insufficient English language practice among Malaysian students.

Background to the Study

The issue with students' lack of English language proficiency is prominent among rural school students in Malaysia as they do not have enough exposure towards the language as compared to students who live in urban and suburban areas in Malaysia. Also, there is insufficient English language practice among these students (Rosli Talif & Jayakaran Mukundan, 1994; Jamali Ismail & Hasliza Aris, 2002). Malaysian students who are staying in secluded areas do not see how English is important in their daily lives. This eventually lowers their motivation and lessens their proficiency in the language (Jamali Ismail & Hasliza Arif, 2002). This situation is quite disturbing because without seeing the practicality of using the second language in their community circle, there is a high tendency for these students in the remote areas to have a negative attitude towards learning the language

In order to overcome the disparity of students' lack of English language proficiency, especially those in the rural and secluded areas of Malaysia, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has developed a nationwide policy, called the Malaysian Education Blueprint. (Ministry of Education, 2013). In the Blueprint (2013), it is clearly stated that one of the 11 shifts is to "ensure every child is proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English Language" (p.12). In the Blueprint also, there are three waves of changes to be done in the Malaysian education system. The first wave was about the blueprint implementation, where there will be more support for teachers and focus on core student skills. In the second wave, there should already be changes and improvements in the system. Whereas, in the final wave, schools are expected to have autonomy to handle their own administration. Even though the Malaysian education system is currently in the second wave of the Blueprint plan in which it is undergoing changes and improvements in the education system, the desired results still seem so far away when it comes to students' proficiency in English, particularly those in rural areas. This may be due to the students, especially those in remote or rural areas, unable to see the immediate need to use English in their lives.

In exploring this issue, this research aims to understand the attitudes of students studying in a rural school in a southern state in the Peninsular of Malaysia on their learning of the English language. This study specifically looks to examine how the sociocultural and psychological factors in this area affect the students' attitudes towards learning English. The main objectives of this research are:

1. To investigate rural secondary school students' attitudes towards learning the English language
2. To explore what kinds of sociocultural and psychological factors that may contribute to the rural secondary school students attitudes towards learning the English language
3. To determine how these sociocultural and psychological factors may contribute to the rural secondary school students' attitudes towards learning the English language

Despite learning English for 11 years during their primary and secondary education, most rural students in Malaysia can hardly master the English language (Hussein Islam & Parilah, 2014); and this issue is very apparent when they further studies to tertiary education or when they enter the workforce. There is a significant relationship between the rural students' attitudes and their English Language achievement (Adnan, 1985). It is therefore important to conduct a research on this topic because by understanding the Malaysian rural students' attitudes, more understanding can be achieved about their lack of English language proficiency and thus provide suggestions to avoid problems in the future.

The findings of this research will not only benefit the students on their learning, but it will also benefit the teachers and the society at large in which it will help them to understand the students' attitude towards learning the English language. This may hopefully lead the English teachers to reflect on their teaching practices and make necessary changes to address this issue.

An in-depth qualitative research, such as a case study or an ethnographic research, is the best research design for this topic because it helps in understanding the real culture of the community in

rural areas. This is where the researchers seek to find understanding of this phenomenon or this issue (i.e., case) by going below the surface and beyond assumptions to study about this matter in depth. By understanding the social and cultural elements that contributes to the Malaysian rural secondary students' attitude towards learning English, only then will we be able to understand the reason behind their negative attitudes when learning the English language.

Review of Literature

Many Malaysian students in general do understand that English is important and they realize that English brings many benefits to them. However, they do not put sufficient amount of hard work to make their English better (Noraini and Noorizah, 1999 as cited in Siti Sukainah and Melor 2014). However, in many rural areas, the students are largely influenced by the "shy" mentality as well as the "small-mindedness" of the society which blinded them from seeing the significance of the language (Lee, 2003; Ler, 2012).

Moreover, Siti Norliana (2008) stated that social context is a big influence in shaping one's attitude. This statement is in parallel with Brown (2000) who claimed that one's attitude "develop early in childhood and are the result of parents and peers' attitudes" (p.180), together with others from other cultures. Siti Norliana added that attitudes towards a language frequently start at home. Learning a language could also be influenced by the geographical characteristics of the place where a student is learning a second language (Navarro-Villarroel, 2011). For example, most Malaysian school children, in particular those who reside in the rural areas, experience very minimal contact with English language, which is only during their English classes (Normazidah et al., 2012). This situation portrays the lack of relevance of learning English language for these rural school students. As a result, they show poor attitudes towards the language as it is not meaningful to them. Apart from that, the students' attitude is very much associated with their perception on the risk of embarrassment and losing face throughout the learning process (Horwitz, 1990, as cited in Gobel and colleagues (2013). This anxious feeling will only lead to debilitation of the language learning process (Du, 2009; Morreale, 2011; Tanveer, 2007).

Lee (2003) suggests that many English as a second language (ESL) students in our country still perceive English language in a negative way. In her research, she found that, within certain contexts, ESL students in rural parts in Malaysia feel more accepted when they do not use English rather than when using the language. She also found that using English in some situations may even lead to resentment, enmity, as well as alienation. This is further supported by Ler (2012), who stated that rural students are influenced by the narrow-mindedness and shyness mentality which is an archetypal behaviour for people with limited exposure towards English.

Research Theoretical Framework

Based on the review of related literature, there are quite a number of related theories/approaches and models in regard to this study. However, Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory and Spolsky's (1989) Model of Second Language Learning and Gardner's (1985) Second Language Acquisition Theory are connected most significantly and linked closely to the study.

Focusing on the importance of social interaction towards cognitive development, Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory posits that sociocultural factors are one of the major factors affecting students' attitude towards learning English. Vygotsky believed that everything is learned on two levels. First, the development occurs through interaction with others. The second stage is when it is integrated into the individual's mental structure. Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the importance of social interaction to develop one's learning process preceding the individual stage. Spolsky's Model of Second Language Learning (1989) also suggests that social context plays a big role in molding one's attitude. This model highlights that social context plays a major role in developing in the students' set of attitudes towards not just the language being learned but also the speakers of the language as well as the language learning situations. Aside from that, this model also connects the social context with second language learning in where it determines the social provision of language learning situations and opportunities of various kinds. On the other hand, Gardner's (1985) Second Language Acquisition Theory posits that the teacher's role (i.e., way of teaching) in classroom is significant in shaping the students' attitude. This theory also highlights how

the students' past experiences in learning the language may affect their attitudes. In addition to that, Gardner (1985) also believes that the amount of interaction that one has with the society around him/her using a particular language would also affect their attitude towards learning the language.

Given the brief descriptions of these theories, the researchers believe that these three theories are best used in conducting the research because they are able to explain about both the sociocultural and psychological elements that shape the students' attitudes towards learning the English language. These theories will be used and referred to in guiding this research and to explain the findings of the study

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research design in which the researchers conducted a case study approach to investigate the attitudes of Malaysian rural secondary school students in learning English as a second language. According to Yin (2011), a qualitative research contributes knowledge into existing or developing ideas that may clarify human social conduct. In addition, according to Patton and Cochran (2002), a qualitative research and its methods aim to understand aspects of social life rather than just producing numbers. A qualitative researcher who does case studies is more concerned in the meaning people make of their lives in specific situations (Dyson and Genishi, 2005). Baxter and Jack (2008) strengthen this statement by claiming that "the case study methodology provides tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their contexts" (p. 544). Thus, in order to explore Malaysian rural secondary school students' attitudes in learning English as a second language, the researchers employed the case study qualitative research approach. The case study approach is suitable for this research because instead of just wanting to know what is the attitude of the students, the researchers aimed to understand why and how the phenomenon (i.e., positive or negative attitudes) among students were developed.

Research Setting and Research Participants

This research was conducted in a public secondary school (SMK Berjaya, a pseudonym) in a residential area (Sentosa, a pseudonym), in a rural district of a southern state in Peninsular Malaysia. Considering the fact that this state, the district, and the school was quite diverse ethnically in its population (i.e., 67% Malays, 19% Chinese and 14% Indians), and the fact that the students in this district (and particularly in this school) were often found to having quite poor attitudes towards the teaching and learning (and especially using) the English language, this setting was a suitable place for this research as it aimed to see the sociocultural factors affecting one's attitude towards learning English as a second language.

There were six students from this school who were purposely selected to be participants in the research, in which there were two students from forms 1, 2 and 4 who were invited to be participants in the research. This purposive sampling method is done according to maximum variation sampling approach, (Patton and Cochran, 2002), to which the researchers purposely select participants from a wide range of extremes. In doing so, each pair from each form level were purposively selected by the researchers identifying one student with a positive attitude, and one student with a negative attitude towards learning the English language. The selection of the participants were done through the help and suggestions of the gatekeepers, which are the school administrative personnel, and especially the English language teachers in this particular school. In choosing the participants, the researchers came up with a selection criteria, in which they considered the students' personal and academic backgrounds, such as race, gender, and also their English language proficiency level(s). It is also important to note that initially, the researchers wanted to involve 10 students in which they planned to choose two students from each form (i.e., form 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5). However, according to one of the rules set by the Educational Planning, Research and Development (EPRD) under the Ministry of Education, students who are involved in the PT3 examination (form 3 students) and SPM examination (form 5 students), should not be involved in the research in order to avoid any distractions in their studies. Hence, the researchers had to only focus on students from form 1, 2 and 4 students.

Research Instruments

In this study, the researchers gathered the data from multiple sources and by using several qualitative research instruments. The research instruments that were used are face-to-face semi-

structured interview sessions, observation sessions, field notes, and document analysis of lesson materials (e.g., teaching plans, teaching modules, students' exercises, etc.).

Semi-structured interview sessions. In this study, the researchers conducted two individual interviews on each student. The first interview with the students focused on their personal, sociocultural and psychological backgrounds. This is so that the researchers get better understanding about the students before they engage in the next data collection techniques, which was to observe them and to collect and analyse documents from the students. After collecting data in the observations and analyzing related documents, the students were interviewed for the second time. This is to get to know more on how they perceive English and their opinions on the significance of learning English as well as their uses of English (inside and outside of the school setting), and their exposure towards the English language.

Observation sessions. The researchers observed each student for at least three to four times throughout the entire period of the study. In doing so, the researchers observed the way the student interacted with the teacher and other students, and most importantly his/her attitudes towards the lessons, which were observed through their interactions, actions, reactions, and their participations in class.

Field notes. The researchers also did a systematic note-taking during the period of the research on important events and circumstances that are deemed to be useful to inform the research. They took these field notes by recording the times and places of the observations and other important events and circumstances, together "with a description of what is observed on one side and observer comments on the other" (Dyson & Genishi, 2006, p.60).

Documents. The researchers also reviewed related documents from the participants prior to, during, and after their interview sessions. The document review were done mostly on the students' learning materials which included students' exercise books and examination scripts as well as their homework.

Data Collection

In gaining permission to conduct this research in the school, the researchers sent the required form (i.e., BPPDP 1.2 for) to the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) under the Ministry of Education to get the permission to do the research. Upon receiving the permission, the researchers sent out a formal letter to the District Education Office to get their consent to carry out this research. The researchers also contacted the District Education Office to follow up on their request to carry out the study in this school. After the request from the District Education Office succeeded, the researchers later proceeded to send an official letter of request to the principal of the school requesting permission to conduct research. After their request was approved, the researchers set up meetings with the main school administrator who were available in the school to explain the background of the research and the commitment required from the schools, particularly from the teachers and the students who would be studied.

Upon given permission to conduct the study and with the advice from the school administrators and teachers, in the beginning of the study the researchers identified and selected the students who would participate in the study, and this was done in accordance to the selection procedures and selection criteria that were developed. After the students were chosen, the researchers contacted their parents to ask for their oral consent before giving the consent letter to the students for them to pass to their parents.

After all the written consents are returned, the researchers started collecting the data. The researchers started with the first interview session (i.e., Pre-Observation Interview) with the students and the interview session with their parents. After that, the researchers started observing the students. During the observation period, they started collecting the lesson materials (i.e., the students' homework, the copies of the teachers' lesson plan, the worksheets, etc.). Throughout the whole process, they continuously conducted the formal and informal observations and took field notes.

Data Analysis

The main data for this study were generated from the interview sessions, the lesson observation sessions, and field notes. These particular data were then supplemented by data from other source (i.e., the students learning materials) through series of triangulation. This corroboration, according to Yin (2011), “serves as another way of strengthening the validity of a study” (p. 81). The data set provided “multiple kinds of data on which to build interpretations, answers to research questions, and conclusions” (Abu Bakar, 2013, p. 81)

The researchers analyzed the data using thematic analysis, in which they first compiled all the data (Yin, 2011), read, and made annotations on all the data received from each instrument. Patton and Cochran also claimed that although these preliminary observations (on the data) may not seem very significant, it would be very helpful for the first few transcripts as the researchers would still be struggling to sink in the data.

After that, the researchers went deeper and more thoroughly into the data and start breaking them into parts. This process is also known as the disassembling of data process (Yin, 2011). They then reassembled the data (Yin, 2011) into the identified themes (Patton & Cochran, 2002). At this stage, the researchers used the data from all the instruments and started to identify the themes. These themes largely depended on the conceptual framework of the research where the two major elements were sociocultural factors and psychological factors. After analysing all the data separately--according to the instrument and according to each participant, in which they repeated the same analytical process according to each of the participants based on each of their individual data collected from the research instruments--the researchers analysed and made the conclusions (Yin, 2011) on the overall data. In doing so, the researchers did the triangulation process. Triangulations can be divided into four kinds; i) methods triangulation, ii) triangulation of sources, iii) analyst triangulation, and iv) theory/perspective triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999). In this research, the researchers did two types of triangulation which were methods triangulation (i.e., the instruments) and triangulation of sources (the participants).

Validity of Research

In order to ensure that the research was carried out with integrity and rigor, the researchers were involved with the participants quite closely and were in the field for somewhat a long period of time to which the researchers did detailed interviews, observations, field notes and document reviews to get rich data. This process involved 6 different students, in which all of these data were triangulated with one another. This means that two of Maxwell’s (2009) validity and rigor criteria were met, in which the research engaged with intensive long-term involvement and also with the collection of various rich data. Throughout the data collection process (i.e., interview, observations, field notes, and document analysis) the researchers checked with the participants whether or not the interpretations of the data analysed and interpreted were the same with what the respondents intended to convey. This fitted the 4th criteria, which is respondents’ validation or member checking. Lastly, the researchers made comparison of the data received from one participant to the other to fulfil the 5th criteria, comparison. In doing so, the researchers constantly compared all of the data collected from each participant with one another in determining the answers for the research questions. The procedure involved not only the various data collected on each individual participant (i.e., within-case analysis) but also across participants (i.e., cross-case analysis) (Yin, 2011).

Research Findings

Form 1 Students (Devi and Fahim, pseudonyms)

Attitudes towards learning English. Devi and Fahim are form 1 students (i.e., similar to grade 8) are 13 year old students who come from middle-class family background. Devi’s father is a security guard while her mother is a nurse. As for Fahim, his father is a salesman while his mother is a homemaker. Despite being classmates, these two students do not seem to have similar attitudes towards English learning. Devi, in one hand, shows high enthusiasm in learning the language while Fahim, on the other, did not at all have passion for learning the English language.

Although Fahim claimed to have a slight interest in learning the English language when interviewed, Fahim’s behaviour in the classroom, as observed a few times by the researcher, indicated

quite the opposite. Not only was he being playful and ignoring the lesson, he was also disturbing his friends who were sitting near him in the class. When asked to explain his behaviour (during the post-observation interview session), he claimed that it was because he did not understand the lesson and hence, he lost his interest in learning the lesson.

Similarly, during the post-observation interview session done with him, whenever asked for reasons of him not showing positive attitudes, 90% of the answers would be either *"It's hard"* or *"I don't understand"*. Ironically, Fahim who claimed to have problem understanding English language, did not actually put much effort in improving the language. He rarely watched English movies and videos, and he did not listen to English songs because again, *"I don't understand"*, he said.

In contrast, Devi, being the only primary participant (out of six) who volunteered to be interviewed in English, really did show her interest towards the language. During the observations, the researchers could see her asking for clarifications from the teacher quite a number of times showing her interest to know more about the lesson being taught. Apart from that, she also volunteered to answer the teacher's question and to help her friends who did not know how to answer the questions asked by the teacher.

Through the lesson observations, Devi's passion can also be seen when she jotted down the meanings of the words that she did not understand as the teacher was explaining the definition of those words. Fahim on the contrary, did not make such effort. All these behaviours portrayed by Devi showed that she had positive attitudes in learning the language. This statement is supported by Kara (2009), who claimed that students with positive attitudes in learning any subjects would give good attention during the lesson as to show their interest. Also, he stated that these students would be willing to put extra effort to ensure they get maximum input from the teacher.

Analysing their lesson materials (i.e. their exercises and notes), the researchers found that Devi completed all the notes and the tasks assigned to her. Fahim too, did complete some of his tasks and notes. However, there were some exercises left uncompleted. When asked, Fahim admitted that he only did the homework because he was afraid of being scolded/punished by the teacher while Devi passionately said *"I love it"*, to answer the question why did she finished her homework. This phenomenon reflected the difference between these two participants in regards to their attitudes towards learning English as the second language.

Sociocultural and psychological elements affecting attitudes towards learning English.

With regards to the sociocultural backgrounds of Devi and Fahim, both participants lived in a multiracial neighbourhoods, and both have admitted to have never conversed in English with their neighbours. However, Devi did use English when she talks to her cousins who live nearby as her cousins do not communicate in Tamil (i.e., Devi's mother tongue). This created a positive experience for Devi to practice the English language in her interactions with her cousins.

Fahim, on the other hand, never used English as a medium of communication with anyone in his house, and not even to anybody outside of his house. School (i.e., during English lessons), was the only place for him to use English, if at all. Interestingly, he claimed that he was aware of the importance of the English language in his studies and for his future. He stated that English is important for people to get a job. However, he also claimed that he had little interest towards learning or using the English language because, according to him, English was difficult to learn. He hardly made any effort to be better at the English language. During the several observations made on him, he was seen to not pay attention when the teacher was teaching (during the first observation), and he was not discussing with his friends during the group work assigned (during the second observation) as was instructed by the teacher. When asked, he admitted to have acted in such way because he found the English language too hard to comprehend that he eventually lost his interest in learning.

Form 2 students (Jason and Jonathan, pseudonyms)

Attitudes towards learning English. Jason and Jonathan are form 2 students (i.e., similar to grade 9) are 14-year old students. Similar with Devi and Fahim, Jason and Jonathan also come from middle-class family background, and both have been residing in Sentosa for a long period of time. Jason's father paints cars for a living while Jonathan's father, just like Devi's, is a security guard. Both Jason's and Jonathan's mothers are not employed. Jason, in one hand, shows positive attitude in learning the language while Jonathan, on the other, does not.

During the pre-observation interview session, Jason claimed that he would always try to speak in English in every opportunity that he had, to improve his proficiency. Not only that, Jason would also read English reading materials in the school's library and listen to English songs because he said through these activities, "*I can learn new [English] words*". However, he rarely watches English movies, saying that "*They talk too fast in the movies,*" hence, not allowing him to learn English as much. Jason's thirst for English knowledge was also reflected in his neat and completed English exercises and notes. Believing that homework is also a way to improve his knowledge, Jason always makes sure that he never left any homework uncompleted. During lesson observations, Jason's positive attitude towards learning the English language can be clearly seen. For instance, the moment he was assigned the task, he was observed to immediately start working on it. He appeared to lead the group discussion, and give ideas to his teammates. Similarly, when given time to finish the individual task, he also made full use of the opportunity without wasting time. Jason's involvement in the whole-class discussion was also very positive. He actively responded to the teacher's question and hardly seen to lose focus in the lesson.

Jonathan, on the contrary, did not seem to have such passion in learning English. He admitted that he sometimes did not complete his English language tasks because he had problem understanding them. He also admitted to have made no effort to ask for help. When asked why, he just said "*I don't know.*" Jonathan claimed that he would like English more if he understood it better, but he also admitted to the fact that he was not motivated to make enough effort to learn the language. This negative attitude was further made obvious during the observations sessions. Jonathan was observed not giving attention during the English lessons, in which he was seen playing with his stationaries, playing with his fingers, and had his eyes roaming inside and outside the classroom. He was also talking and laughing with his friends when given time to complete his work during the English lesson. For instance, during the first observation, he was seen to keep interacting with a friend sitting on the opposite side of his table, not only once, but for a few times. Similar occurrences were observed happening during the other two lesson observations as well.

Sociocultural and psychological elements affecting attitudes towards learning English.

Although both Jason and Jonathan have multiracial neighbours, the major race in Jonathan's housing area is Indian. Jason however, lives in a residential area where the major race is Malay, even though he is from a Chinese family. Regardless, neither of them would use English as the main medium of communication. Jason claimed that he would use Malay language while Jonathan said that he would use Tamil.

Nonetheless, Jason made his own effort to create the English social interaction environment by speaking in English with his cousins, who were good in the English language, whenever they came to his house. From the interview sessions, it was learned that both Jason and Jonathan were not provided with English reading materials at home. They were also not exposed to the English language by their parents. However, both of the participants were able to see the importance of the language, believing that the English language is essential for them to get good jobs and have better future.

Although both Jason and Jonathan were on the same page pertaining the issue of the relevance of English in their future – despite not being provided with English materials at home – they seemed to be on two different pages in the way they act and react towards learning the English language. Jonathan, on one hand portrays a disinterest towards the English language. During the interview, he disclosed the fact that he had never made any efforts to read any English materials in the school library, where there are abundance of materials provided. Also, he didn't listen to English songs and watch any English videos/movies saying "*I don't understand.*". He also stated that even if he were to live in a community that speaks English, he would rather communicate in Malay. On the other hand, Jason, as stated earlier, made full use of opportunities that he had (i.e., reading English materials in the library, talking in English with his cousins, listening to English songs, and always doing his English homework), so that he could improve his English language proficiency.

With regards to the psychological factor, Jonathan revealed that sometimes his English teacher was quite fierce and did not seem to understand his needs. To make things worse, he also disclosed the fact that he had experienced embarrassing moments when his friends made fun of his improper or incorrect use of the English language. For instance, when he pronounced some words wrongly or failed to answer the teacher's questions, he will be laughed at by his friends. Jason in

contrast, claimed to have enjoyed his English learning experience very much. Interestingly, Jason also admitted to the fact that he was actually embarrassed by his English teacher when he was in his standard six. When asked how he was insulted, he said, he was scolded rather harshly in front of his friends a few times by his teacher, for not being able to do well in English. However, Jason optimistically perceived the experience as a motivation for him to do better in learning the English language.

Form 4 students (Muin and Hakim, pseudonyms)

Attitudes towards learning English. Muin and Hakim are both 16 year old boys who are in form 4 (i.e., similar to grade 11). Just like the other four participants, they both are from middle-class family backgrounds. Muin's father is a pensioner who used to work in the Public Works Department. After his father retired, both his parents became hawkers, selling banana fritters and "*cendol*" nearby SMK Berjaya. As for Hakim, his father was a retired army personnel who became a security guard at the District Office, while his mother is a housemaker. Muin was identified by the teachers and school administrators as a student who has a very good attitude towards learning the English language, meanwhile, Hakim is identified as a student who has poor attitude towards learning the English language. However, there were some challenges in triangulating their spoken words (from the interviews) with their actions (from the observations), particularly on Muin, who was identified by the teachers / gatekeepers as a positive student, but portrayed different attitudes when speaking about learning the English language and when actually learning the English language.]

Both Muin and Hakim claimed that learning the English language is very important for their future. However, for people who acknowledged the importance of English language for their future, Muin and Hakim appeared to not act accordingly to their beliefs. For instance, they claimed that English is too hard. But when asked whether or not they would do English tasks if they knew how to, it can be said that both of them – on two separate individual interviews - did not give positive answers. Hakim said,

“Well I still won't... (I am) too lazy”

(Hakim, personal communication, Feb 1, 2017)

While Muin, when interviewed, said,

“InsyaAllah, if I feel like doing it”

(Muin, personal communication, Feb 3, 2017)

The way both participants responded to the researcher's question, did not appear to reflect any enthusiasm or passion towards learning the language.

However, when the researchers analysed their exercise books, Muin seemed to have completed more tasks in his English language exercises as compared to Hakim. To be fair, in one of the observations done on them, both of them, did write down the meanings of certain words on the passage used for a comprehension exercise (when instructed by the teacher). In addition to that, when observed for the first time in the English lesson, the two participants gave impression to the researchers as if they were actively involved in the lesson. They stayed focus when the teacher was teaching and, together with a few friends, answered some questions that the teacher addressed to the whole class.

During the second and third observations however, Muin was being more attentive as compared to Hakim, who was observed talking to his friends and losing focus every now and then. Meanwhile, Muin's positive attitudes in doing his homework and being attentive in the class, portray that he might actually in fact like learning the English language. However, this behaviour contradicted his negative statement, highlighted in the earlier part of the section, when he said that he would only do his homework if he felt like doing so. When asked further, he said,

“When you are too tired... things happen...”

(Muin, personal communication, Feb 3, 2017)

He justified his action (of not having passion to do homework), by admitting that he was always really tired after helping his parents, selling banana fritters and "*cendol*" nearby SMK Berjaya, after school hours.

Sociocultural and psychological elements affecting attitudes towards learning English. In regards to their sociocultural backgrounds, Muin and Hakim, both have been living in the housing area where, just like themselves, 95% of the residents were Malays. Because they are not exposed to

social interactions in English, Muin and Hakim felt that it would be strange if they were to converse using the language with their neighbours, and admitted that they have never spoken English with their neighbors.

When asked for their opinion on English language, both Muin and Hakim claimed to be interested in learning the English language, but believed that they would be more passionate towards learning the language if their English teachers had taught them in a more interesting way. Not only that, both participants emphasized on how their current teacher was a fierce person who taught according to her mood. Hakim said *"Sometimes she's fun. Sometimes she's too fierce"*. On a related note, Muin claimed that the teacher did not understand him and will keep on teaching the way she liked rather than considering the approach that he and his friends would have preferred. When suggested to discuss the matter with her, he said that he could never possibly be honest with the teacher on how he felt about her teaching. He sarcastically said, *"She'd break a bottle on my head"* and laughed. To make things worse, both Muin and Hakim revealed that they have been, in many occasions, being made fun of by their own friends for not being able to pronounce some English words correctly. . When asked why, they said that their friends love to make fun of each other whenever one of them make any mistake. To them, it was a form of joke. To Muin and Hakim, however, there were points when these two participants did not see those actions (i.e., being laughed at) as something funny. They were embarrassed. One can understand as how such experience would trigger negative attitudes among students towards learning the second language.

Discussions/ Conclusion

Psychological Factors Influencing Students' Attitudes in Learning English as a Second Language

Students' Individual Reactions to Negative/Positive Experiences. The findings suggest that some students were found to have negative attitudes as a result of having negative experiences in learning or using the English language in the past either in the classroom or even in their neighborhoods. Many participants admitted that they experienced being either embarrassed by the teachers or their friends for not being able to perform well in learning the English language, particularly when it comes to spoken English. This has caused them to be more passive in the classroom, avoiding to speak English to not risk themselves from making any other mistakes. This finding is largely connected to Gardner's (1985) Second Language Acquisition Theory. Gardner believed that the ways students perceive their experience in learning the second language provides great influence in the development of their attitude. Being involved in a negative experience (or what they perceive to be negative) in learning the second language, the students will tend to have negative attitude towards the language.

Interestingly, there were some students, who in spite of having faced embarrassments, such as being laughed at by friends and scolded by the teacher, did not view the experience as something fully negative. Instead, the experiences were viewed as a motivation for them to work harder to improve their English language proficiency. This shows that the way one perceives the incidents that they experienced vary from one another. While some students viewed the embarrassing experience negatively, some chose to turn it into a platform to improve themselves. This positive reaction towards a negative experience goes back to how badly one wants to learn the language as mentioned in Spolsky's (1989), that is, one's degree of effort in learning the second language depends on how s/he views the significance and the importance of the language to themselves. Therefore, despite letting the pain of being embarrassed to negatively affect their learning process, these students managed to look at the bigger picture and only focused on improving their language. To illustrate, the two participants who showed this interesting behaviour were Devi and Jason. Devi was laughed at by her friends for not being able to enunciate English words correctly, and Jason was scolded by his teacher for not being able to answer English questions correctly. Unlike the other participants who claimed to be demotivated when embarrassed by their friends and teachers, both Devi and Jason made their own effort to improve their proficiency by reading a lot of English books and listening to English music so that they could widen their vocabulary list.

Lessons Not Catered to Students' Proficiency Levels and Interests. In regards to the psychological factor, another significant issue highlighted was on the English lessons taught by the teachers were deemed to not really cater to the levels of students' English language proficiency and their interests. Most of the students, even one with positive attitude towards learning English (e.g., Muin), have negative attitudes towards the learning of English, in which they claimed to have not enjoyed their English teachers' lessons. According to Gardner's (1985) Second Language Acquisition Theory, it is important for teachers to ensure that the students enjoy the learning process of the second language. Learning in an interesting classroom would help them to nurture positive attitude towards the language.

Sociocultural Factors Influencing Students' Attitudes in Learning English as a Second Language

Role of the English Language in the Rural Society. The main sociocultural factor that influences the attitude of Malaysian rural students towards learning the English language is the mentality of the society towards the English language, particularly on how they see the important role of the English language within the society (or in this case, lack thereof). The findings from the interview sessions on the participants suggest that the residents of Sentosa were more likely to feel that the English language does not really have an important role in their society, and thus their lack of use of this language in the society.. The aims towards learning and using the language as explained by Spolsky (1989) depends on how the language is perceived within community. This perception, which would mould their attitudes towards the use of this language in the community, has a significant impact on the students' behaviours as well. Therefore, if using the target language was viewed by the community as not important and not practiced, it could have been a big factor to hinder the students from using it, believing that it has not so important connotations. This consequently would nurture a resistance from the students towards the use of English language in communication, particularly outside of the classroom.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, it is vital for teacher to understand the students' and their needs well, either from a sociocultural point of view and even the psychological point of view. While completing the curriculum and syllabus is important for the teachers, they have to also consider the fact that the students are of different levels of English proficiency and academic proficiency from one class to another. Aside from that, in order to meet each other's expectations, it is very crucial for both the students and the teachers to have two-way communication between each other. Also, to have a more effective impact, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), should play its role in connecting parents to the school so that they could be more involved in the development of their children's English language learning. As for the school administration, they should play their role as leaders by providing sufficient support for the teachers in conducting the programs suggested.

The researchers suggests that more research on students' attitude be conducted in the future to further understand this area of research. Moreover, the researchers suggests that for future research that the participants are chosen from at least 2-3 different schools, (i.e., a multiple case study), rather than just from one school. This is so that the future researchers would have better explanation to describe the findings as the data would be even richer than a single research setting case study. In regards to research participants, the researchers suggest that they should be probed more during the interview sessions as they tend to give very short answers which may not be very helpful during the data analysis. Also, similar research should also be done on different groups of English language learners, especially those who are from these rural areas.

It is important to note that the study of attitudes particularly of rural students in Malaysia would in fact bring a number of benefits towards the education system in Malaysia, particularly in the context of English education for rural students. The findings of these research will be helpful to give the in-depth descriptions and explanations on how sociocultural and psychological factors affect students' attitudes towards learning English language aside from giving clearer visions on students' positive and/or negative attitudes when it comes to learning the English language.

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