

# Sociolinguistic Factors in the Development of English Language Proficiency Among Students in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** Sociolinguistics factors influence the level of English Language proficiency among Malaysian students. There are three contextual factors involved which are the participants, the environment and culture. Participants refer to the students who come from different backgrounds with diverse needs and goals of learning the language. Language distance, native language proficiency, prior knowledge of the second language, dialect and register language status and attitudes play a crucial role in this factor. Besides that, the participants' integrative and instrumental motivations are also contributing factors to the different level of proficiency in second language acquisition. The second factors is the environment which includes home support, the school environment and the community. Home support is concerned with atmosphere that parents create at home regarding language use, the school environment refers to peer groups, teachers and the learning process, whereas the community deals with the society that the students interact with. Finally cultural factors such as cultural differences and settings also have brought the different levels of proficiency among students in Malaysia.

**Key words:** contextual factor, English language proficiency, second language acquisition.

## 1. Introduction

In discussing issues of second language acquisition, sociolinguistic factors must be taken into consideration. Brimmer (1976) clearly stated that in order to understand the acquisition process of any language, it must be done within its social adaptive context. Indeed the learner is the center in which all discussions in this paper will revolve on and because of that this paper will focus on contextual factors in second language acquisition. Contextual factors here refer to the participants, their environment and culture. Each of these interrelated aspects have a define role in creating different levels of proficiency among Malaysians students.

## 2. The Participants

Learners come from different backgrounds and thus have different knowledge about the target language. They will responds differently and also hold different perspectives towards the language. The aspects involved with regards to this aspect of contextual factors are needs and the goals of the learner, language distant, native language proficiency and prior knowledge of the second language.

### 2.1. The Needs of the Learner

Each learner is different as shaped by experience within their own social context, thus have different needs. Walqui (2001) has affirmed this by saying that the diversity of the students' needs and goals are resulted from their diverse backgrounds. In Malaysian multicultural and multilingual context, English is taught as a second language and that presents different sets of language difficulty to learners. In terms of the spoken language for example, some learners are very proficient in oral communication but are weak in the grammatical aspect of the language. Other participants might have an advantage over other aspect of the language but are having problems communicating their thoughts.

These differences bring about different level of proficiencies among them and require special treatment . Such a situation and need has been elaborated by Walqui. She reveals that in today's heterogeneous classroom, such diversity requires a different conception of the curricula and a different approach materials.

Clearly, multicultural and multilingual diversity has brought about different needs in Malaysian students and this has created an unbalance state in their proficiency level. Therefore, it is important for the English teacher to identify these needs if they wish to attain the desired learning outcome

### 2.2. The Goals of the Learner

As proven earlier, students come into the classroom bringing diversity in terms of needs and also goals of the target language. Goals set out behavior in second language acquisition. Behavior in turn affects level of proficiency. In other words, diverse goals produce different proficiency level among students. The rule of goals in determining the students' level of proficiency should never be undermined. Learners' goals may determine how they use the language, their pronunciation, the accuracy of their grammar, lexical knowledge and the amount of effort put into understand messages in the target language<sup>[16]</sup>.

Although English is taught only a second language in Malaysia, its influence is profound. The usage of English also varies among them as some regard English as their first language. Learners then have different motives in learning the language and thus set different objectives towards the language. Goals therefore can be the driving force that determines the proficiency level among students. This is especially true in second language acquisition context where the learning process can be a long and difficult journey.

### 2.3. Language Distant

Language distant refers to how the second language differs from the first language of the learner. The role of the learners' mother tongue or first language in second language acquisition is just as important. First language can either foster or hinder the learning of a target language. Lado (1981) claims that students who come into contact with a foreign language will find features similar to his native language easy to be acquired and others extremely difficult.

In Malaysian context, several native languages exist because of ethnic and cultural diversity. Thus English will be compared not only to Bahasa Melayu but also to Chinese, Tamil and other dialects as well depending on the learners' linguistic background. This sets different level of language difficulty in the learning process in each individual therefore creating different level of proficiency among Malaysian students.

### 2.4. Native Language Proficiency

The native language of the learner also plays another role in second language acquisition in terms of the learners' proficiency. Native language proficiency promotes proficiency of the target language. Much of this depends on whether the learner has already acquired good skills in their native language when he engages himself in the learning of the second language, in this case English. When he can be considered as a competent language user of this first language, then the learner then has been mentally and linguistically prepared for the next challenge that is second language acquisition. This has been proven by Gurrey (1973). In his study he found that if students have been taught to use his native language with grammatical correctness, then they are ready to learn to use the new language correctly because they are potentially correct language users.

According to Gurrey this is because the learner has already acquired some skills in their first language and therefore is prepared for the acquisition of similar skills in the target language. In Malaysian multicultural and multilingual schools, different level of English proficiency exist because learners have varied proficiency with their native language which is closely related to language distant thus presenting a challenge to teachers in closing such gaps.

### 2.5. Prior Knowledge of the Second Language

Another important factor brings about the differences in the proficiencies among Malaysian students is prior knowledge of the English language. What the learners know about the language system in listening, speaking, reading, and writing is a significant factor that determines their development in the target language. Due to different socio-economic background, level of education of the parents and the people they interact with, the input that learners receive about the English language varies. Thus in one classroom, the students' knowledge of the English language also varies.

Meena Singhal (1998) who compared reading ability between the first and second language refers to prior knowledge of the language system is linguistic schema. She stresses that it plays an important role regardless of first and second language learning. According to her reading in the first language can be both similar and different to reading in the second language as both contexts require knowledge of content, formal, and linguistic schema. In her research, she explained further that by having such as schema, learners can be more competent in the target language.

According to Singhal (1998) The biliterate reader, regardless of text type, language, or orthography would develop strategies and schemas for dealing with different language and texts. The biliterate reader therefore is a flexible reader and one who possesses the knowledge, skills and strategies to accommodate to each language situation, and hence the process of reading in either language will not be seen as different by the reader.

Having less knowledge of the English language has brought different proficiency levels among Malaysian students. It is up to the teacher then to expose and further equipped these students with the knowledge that the required.

### 2.6. Dialect and Register

Dialect is one aspect of language variety that could influence language usage itself. Bernard (1998) states that dialect plays a major role in the history of linguistics. People who speak what they consider as the same language use different words for the same thing or different pronunciations for the same word.

The term dialect according to Peter (1975) means any variety which is grammatically different from any other, perhaps having a different vocabulary or pronunciation. Bernard (1998) has further explained from a linguistic point of view, regional dialects tend to have minor and greater differences from distant varieties. Obviously, the way people speak not to mention their pronunciation are influenced by their own environment and community where they live.

However, learners also have their own pronunciation and speech that they bring into their daily conversation. Generally this will affect their surrounding and the second language acquisition teaching and learning process in classrooms and therefore creating different proficiency levels among the students.

According to Walqui (2001) in schools when it comes to dialect and register, learners may need to learn those that are different from the ones they encounter daily. Therefore, learners have to acquire speech patterns that may be significantly different and unfamiliar with. This again will produce different proficiency levels depending on how much the learners are able to adapt to these changes.

As for the teacher, Carlos et al. (2006) has revealed that when implementing language instruction, the must face instructional decisions regarding their attitudes toward the great variety of language usage that the students bring into the classroom from the community in which they live.

## 2.7. Language Status

Learners acquiring a second language are emotionally involved and have certain perspectives on how it affects their first language. In instances where, the second language becomes a threat towards the first language, obviously learners will be held back in second language acquisition. Walqui (2001) has brought up that in situation where the first language of the students has different status than the second language, students will face a certain dilemma of losing one of language. This will evidently affect the learning process.

In Malaysia context, English has a better status in certain socioeconomic aspects. Being in a multicultural and multilingual country, each student will compare English as a second language to that of their first language. This will lead to different views of the second language and thus bring different of proficiency.

## 2.8. Integrative Motivation

Motivation as defined by Deci and Ryan (1985) is related to basic human needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness. It is true that people require motivation to do something within their live activity. However, motivation as suggested could be increased in order to boost interest. Basically motivation can come from the learners' inside and outside factors which can easily be linked to social experience. Norris-Holt refer to this is as integrative motivation and it is the key component in assisting the learners to develop some level of proficiency with the language. Finnegan (1999) has theorized that integrative motivation typically underlines successful acquisition of a wide range of registers and a native like pronunciation.

One good example of working integrative motivation given by Falk (1998) is desire in learners to learn a second language in order to be integrated in or at least be associated with certain society. Hudson (2001) further supports this by saying that students who rely on integrative approach to language study are usually more highly motivated and overall more successful in language learning.

As each learner undergoes different social experience, they have different motivation level in second language learning process. As a result, learner vary in their competency with the target language.

## 2.9. Instrumental motivation

The other motivation factor which influences of learners proficiency is instrumental motivation. Hudson (2000) has stated that instrumental motivation is characterized by the desire to obtain something practical or concrete from the study of a second language. Learners acquire English for different practical reasons such for job applications or meeting academic requirements when applying for higher learning institutions. In relation to second language learning proficiency Hudson has stated that it is common for second language learners to be successful with instrumental purposes being the underlying reason for study.

## 2.10. Language Attitude

According to Peter (1975) because of the relationship which exists between language and other sociolinguistic factors' language can be socially very symbolic, therefore people have different attitudes toward different varieties of language. Attitude towards language are very important in relation language learning proficiency, and the more significant of this problem is that involving the attitudes of both teacher and the learners of the language.

Learners' attitude towards the second language is reflected in their use of that language. Cummins (1990) mentioned that pattern of language use are reflected in learners' self ratings of current proficiency. Attitudes then lead to usage and usage leads to better commands of the language.

However, due to social experience and other relevant factors such as teaching methods and the media, students will vary in their attitudes towards the learning process and the language. This has been supported by Walqui (2001) when she states that language attitudes in learners, peer group, school, neighborhood and society at large can have an effect on language learning process both positive and negative.

## 3. Environment

The second factor that influences the different level of English Language proficiency among Malaysian students is environment which includes home support, the school environment and the community. Home support is concerned with the atmosphere that parents create at home regarding language use and some aspects from family background. The school environment refers to peer groups, teacher and learning process, whereas the community deals with the society that students interact with.

### 3.1. Home support

Support from home is very important for successful second language learning. Some educators believe that parents of English language learners should speak only English in the home. However, far more important than speaking English is that parents value both the native language and English, communicate with their children in whichever language is most comfortable, and show support for and interest in their children's progress (Walqui 2001).

Besides that, Rosenberg (1996) claims that families who take the time to discuss their goals for language development often see their kids acquire higher levels of language skills in both languages. Parental influences become more important to their children English performance. Attitudes towards target language expressed by the parents or other family members at home, will affect the students performance in the English language. If parents openly talks about the target language and support their children it can make the children feel more comfort to learn and use it.

Family background also takes part in influencing the different levels of English language proficiency (Tarigan 1988). Parents who have good educational background can give good effect to their children by means of exposure to the English language. This is because good education has tight connection to the economic family backgrounds. Socioeconomic status (SES) was identified in educational research of the 1960s and 1970s as one of the most powerful variables influencing student achievement. Another statement about the relationship between success in language learning and learners is given by Burstall (1974), he found consistent statistical relations between parental occupation and scores in language test in both primary and secondary schools. Commonly, family who is better in economic status can easily provide facilities to support their children learning process of the English Language.

### 3.2. School Environment

Another important factor is school environment. Its refers to peer group and teaching learning process. According to Walqui (2001) teenagers tend to be heavily influenced by their peer groups. In second language learning, peer pressure often reduces the desire of the student to work toward native pronunciation, because the sounds of the target language may be regarded as strange. For learners of English as a second language, speaking like a native speaker may unconsciously be regarded as a sign of no longer belonging to their native-language peer group. In working with secondary school students, it is important to keep these peer influences in mind and to foster a positive image for proficiency in a second language.

In addition, Moon (2004) said that peer influences are also important and need to be considered in trying to developed positive attitudes. If students have good attitudes to learn English means that they will have good performance in using the target language. It also builds up their confident when they have peer interaction.

Teachers play a vital role in the teaching and learning processes of students. They have the power to be agents of change and are empowered to become proactive in their students lives? Research indicates that teacher's attitudes toward language may influence their evaluation of students' performance and achievement. They may also affect their evaluations of children language ability (Gutierrez in Anna G. Garcia 2005). Teachers' effort in creating a positive classroom atmosphere gives a big influence to the students' performance. Moon (2004) stated that if there is a friendly atmosphere in the classroom and teacher and students get on well together, then they will both feel more secure and learning is more likely to be encouraged.

### 3.3. Community

The community deals with the society that the students interact with. To fully understand more on the significance of the language that students use, it is important to understand language use in the community. By language use means, essentially, who uses which language, with whom, and for what purpose.

Today, English has top position. Everyone has great desire to learn it, since it has become an international language that many people use for many purposes. Moreover, English is the most important language in the world within communication, education, foreign relationship, political system, and economic system. The reality of the English urgency and necessity have forced everybody to understand English in general or at least when there is one who speaks English we are expected to understand what he/she is talking about.

Nowadays, it is also occurs in Malaysia where English is used in school, both as a medium instruction in the classroom and as a compulsory subject. In addition the position of English is as a second language. English is not only used in school but also in another field such as; economic, politic, and international relations. Therefore most students in Malaysia tend to learn English and use it in their society, because English is a global language, many people choose to use, making it easy for them to communicate with the community.

## 4. Culture

Culture being an essential part of every learner's lives has a very noticeable impact on second language learning. One could even reflect ones culture through language use. In Malaysian context, where cultural diversity is stretched to unlimited extend, the language learning process has undoubtedly been affected. Since culture affects language learning, cultural diversity therefore also plays a role in determining language learning proficiency among Malaysian students.

### 4.1. Culture Differences

Everyone has one's own culture (Nicto 1992) which passes from generation to generation. The variation in interpreting events, reality, and language is rooted in cultural distinctions. There are also cultural differences among people of the same culture. Different cultures perceive the importance of English Language differently, thus it influence the interest of the students to be proficient in the language.

Culture also influences the learning style thus affect the cognitive performance of students. Hence, the proficiency level will be affected too. This will lead to different learning styles among students of different groups. Language shapes the way people in any culture to understand the world around them. (Whorf 1956). In Malaysian context, cultural diversity exist in schools and thus this leads to different interpretations of language learning which in turn leads to different levels of proficiency.

The language learning process has a correlation relationship with cultural experiences. All humans cognitively process information but "cultures differ with respect to the process are used to deal with various situations" (Springer & Deutsch 1981). IN other words, learning styles in any academic subject, in general the English Language may be learned through cultural

experience and according to Fishman (1991) only the language historically and intimately with associated with a given culture is able to transmit their interests.

## 4.2. Cultural Settings

Different sub-cultural setting will influence the interest of students in acquiring the language. This is because culture practice in rural area differ compared to urban area. This affects the ability to acquire a second language especially among students in rural and urban area. Thus, a gap in the proficiency level among students in rural and urban area does exist.

Culturally and linguistically diverse pupils may display “heightened anxiety” and “low self esteem” when they are placed in environment that is different from their own culture (Collier & Hoover, 1987). Therefore, here the sub-culture that exists within specific setting affects the emotional intelligence of learners regarding second language acquisition. It is important for the teacher to be able to identify the cultural background of the students when designing activities and strategies for language learning.

## 5. Conclusion

Sociolinguistics is one of aspect of language learning that has direct influence on students’ proficiency level. Beneath it, there are contextual factors that accounts for why such diversity has taken place. Unlike other relevant factors, contextual factors focus on issues close to the learners and elements that they come into contact with. It is these elements that teachers, administrators and curriculum designer need to be aware of if they wish to achieve the desired outcomes.

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