# THE EFFECTS OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND STRATEGIES ON THE ACQUISITION OF ESL ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS: POST-SECONDARY LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS

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# ABSTRACT

There are multiple factors that can influence second language acquisition. One of the factors is whether English users acquire a second language in a formal or informal environment. This study aimed to determine whether learning English in a formal compared to an informal environment leads to different effects on their English skills. The study also aimed to determine whether learning strategies employed by English users differ in each learning environment. Identifying the appropriate language learning strategy in each language learning environment will allow learners to achieve optimal acquisition of language for their needs. This study is to give an account on what ways the language learning environment can affect the English users based on their perceptions and their strategies in acquiring English skills in their learning environment. Adopting both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the data collection was conducted through in-depth reflexive photography interview and questionnaire. The findings suggest that the informal learning environment is better in acquiring communication skills. Social interaction is the most frequently used strategy in the informal learning environment. This research can serve as a reference for learners, teachers and language educators to enhance English communication skills and utilize effective strategies in pursuing English language mastery.

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# *ABSTRAK*


***KESAN-KESAN PERSEKITARAN PEMBELAJARAN FORMAL DAN TIDAK FORMAL DAN STRATEGI DALAM PEMEROLEHAN KOMUNIKASI LISAN ESL: PERSEPSI PELAJAR PASCA MENENGAH***

*Terdapat pelbagai faktor yang mempengaruhi pemerolehan bahasa kedua. Salah satu daripada faktor tersebut sama ada pengguna bahasa Inggeri smemperoleh bahasa kedua di dalam persekitaran formal atau tidak formal. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti sama ada belajar bahasa Inggeris di dalam persekitaran formal jika dibandingkan dengan persekitaran tidak formal membawa kepada kesan yang berbeza kepada kemahiran bahasa inggeris mereka. Kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti sama ada strategi yang digunakan oleh pengguna bahasa Inggeris berbeza di dalam setiap persekitaran. Mengenal pasti strategi pembelajaran bahasa yang sesuai di dalam setiap persekitaran membolehkan mereka untuk mencapai pemerolehan bahasa yang optimal demi keperluan mereka. Kajian ini adalah untuk menunjukkan bagaimana persekitaran pembelajaran bahasa boleh memberi kesan terhadap pengguna bahasa Inggeris berdasarkan persepsi mereka dan strategi mereka dalam memperolehi kemahiran bahasa Inggeris di dalam persekitaran pembelajaran mereka. Menggunakan 'mixed method', pengumpulan data telah dilakukan dengan temubual mendalam photografi 'Reflexive' dan borang soal selidik. Dapatan kajian mendapati bahawa persekitaran pembelajaran tidak formal adalah lebih baik dalam memperolehi kemahiran komunikasi. Interaksi sosial adalah strategi yang paling banyak digunapakai dalam persekitaran pembelajaran tidak formal. Kajian ini boleh menjadi rujukan kepada pelajar, guru dan pengajar bahasa untuk meningkatkan kemahiran komunikasi Bahasa inggeris dan menggunakan starategi yang efektif dalam usaha mereka menguasai Bahasa Inggeris.*


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# TABLE OF CONTENTS


| TITLE | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| **DECLARATION** | | ii |
| **CERTIFICATION** | | iii |
| **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** | | iv |
| **ABSTRACT** | | v |
| ***ABSTRAK*** | | vi |
| **TABLE OF CONTENTS** | | vii |
| **LIST OF FIGURES** | | xii |
| **LIST OF TABLES** | | xiii |
| **LIST OF GRAPHS** | | xiv |
| **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS** | | xv |
| **LIST OF APPENDICES** | | xvi |
| **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION** | | |
| 1.1. | Introduction | 1 |
| 1.2. | Background of the Study | 2 |
| 1.3. | Problem Statements | 4 |
| 1.4. | Research Aim and Objectives | 7 |
| 1.5. | Research Questions | 8 |
| 1.6. | Significance of the Study | 8 |
| 1.7. | Conceptual Framework | 9 |
| 1.8. | Operational Definitions | 11 |


UMS
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

1.9. Conclusion 12

**CHAPTER 2 : LITERATURE REVIEW**

2.1 Introduction 13

2.2 What is Learning? 13

2.3 What is Acquisition? 14

2.3.1 First Language Acquisition 14

2.3.2 Second Language Learning and Second Language acquisition 15

2.3.3 The Similarities and Difference Between First and Second Language Acquisition 16

2.4 The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis 17

2.5 What is Communication? 18

2.5.1 The Process of Communication 19

2.5.2 The Types of Communication 20

2.6 Interaction Hypothesis 23

2.7 Formal and Informal Learning environment 26

2.8 Strategies in second language acquisition 29

2.8.1 Oxford Language Learning Strategies 29

2.9 Related Studies on The Role of Environment in Second Language Acquisition 31

2.10 Past Studies on the Role of Second Language Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition 33

2.11 Theoretical Framework 34

2.12 Summary 35

UMS
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

**CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 3.1 | Introduction | 36 |
| 3.2 | Research Design | 36 |
| 3.3 | Data Collection Procedure | 39 |
| 3.4 | Population and Sample of the Study | 41 |
| 3.5 | Research Instrument | 42 |
| 3.5.1 | Reflexive Photography Interview | 42 |
| 3.5.2 | Questionnaire | 43 |
| 3.6 | Pilot Studies | 47 |
| 3.7 | Data Analyses | 47 |
| 3.7.1 | Qualitative Data | 47 |
| 3.7.2 | Quantitative Data | 48 |
| 3.8 | Conclusion | 48 |


**CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 4.1 | Introduction | 49 |
| 4.2 | Demographic Data | 50 |
| 4.3 | The effect of Learning Environment on the Acquisition of ESL Communication Skills According to Learners' Perceptions | 56 |
| 4.3.1 | Analysis of Quantitative Data (questionnaire) | 57 |
| 4.3.2 | Analysis of Qualitative Data (Reflexive Photography Interview Data) | 63 |
| 4.3.3.1 | Formal Learning Environment | 63 |


UMS
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 4.3.2.2 | Informal Learning Environment | 67 |
| 4.4 | Learning Strategies Commonly Employed by the Post-Secondary School ESL Users in the Two Different Environments. | 71 |
| 4.4.1 | Formal Learning Environment (Qualitative Data) | 71 |
| 4.4.2 | Informal Learning Environment (Qualitative Data) | 76 |
| 4.5 | Learning Strategies that Significantly Affect the Acquisition of English for Second Language Communication Skills. | 81 |
| 4.5.1 | Formal Learning Environment (Qualitative/Quantitative Data) | 81 |
| 4.5.2 | Informal Learning Environment (Qualitative/Quantitative Data) | 87 |
| 4.5.3 | Analyses of Qualitative Data on Learning Strategies That Significantly Affects the Acquisition of English for Second Language Communication Skills. | 94 |
| 4.6 | Summary | 98 |

**CHAPTER 5:DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5.1 | Introduction | 99 |
| 5.2 | Summary of Findings | 99 |
| 5.2.1 | Learning Environment (formal vs informal) and its Effects to the Acquisition of the ESL Communication Skills Based on Learners' Perceptions. | 100 |
| 5.2.2 | The Strategies Commonly Employed by Post-secondary School ESL Learners in the Formal Learning Environment and Those in the Informal Learning Environment. | 102 |
| 5.2.3 | Strategies that Significantly Affect the Acquisition of ESL in Formal and Informal Learning environments. | 107 |
| 5.3 | Implications of the Study | 114 |


UMS
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

5.4 Research Limitations 116

5.5 Recommendations for Further Research 116

5.6 Conclusion 118

**REFERENCES** 119

**APPENDICES** 128

UMS
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

# LIST OF FIGURES


| | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| Figure 1.1 | Conceptual Framework | 9 |
| Figure 2.1 | The Process of Communication | 19 |
| Figure 2.2 | Interactionist SLA Process Basic Component | 25 |
| Figure 2.3 | Theoretical Framework | 35 |
| Figure 3.1 | Triangulation Design Model | 38 |


UMS
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

# LIST OF TABLES


| | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| Table 3.1 | Research Framework | 39 |
| Table 4.1 | Respondent Gender Demography | 50 |
| Table 4.2 | Respondent Age | 51 |
| Table 4.3 | Respondent Level Of Education | 51 |
| Table 4.4 | Languages Spoken by the Respondents | 53 |
| Table 4.5 | The Effects of Formal Environment in the Acquisition of English as a Second Language | 57 |
| Table 4.6 | The Effects of Informal Environment in the Acquisition of English as a Second Language | 59 |
| Table 4.7 | Responses of Formal and Informal Learning Environments Users of English | 61 |
| Table 4.8 | Formal Respondents Language Usage in Everyday Life | 83 |
| Table 4.9 | Formal Respondent ESL Learning Strategy | 84 |
| Table 4.10 | Formal Learners' Perceptions of the Effects of Language Learning Environment on Language Acquisition, Usage and Construction | 86 |
| Table 4.11 | Informal Respondents English Usage in Everyday Life | 89 |
| Table 4.12 | Informal Respondents' ESL Learning Strategies | 90 |
| Table 4.13 | Informal Learners' Perceptions of the Effects of Language Learning Environment on Language Acquisition, Usage and Construction | 92 |
| Table 4.14 | Means and p-values for item 1 -7 | 94 |
| Table 4.15 | Means and P-Values for Item 8 - 14 | 95 |
| Table 4.16 | Means and P-Values for Item 15 -22 | 96 |


UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

# LIST OF GRAPH


| | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| Graph 4.1 | Percentages of Languages Spoken by the Respondents | 54 |


UMS
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SLA : Second Language Acquisition

LLE : Language Learning Environment

LLS : Language Learning Strategy

IFE : Informal Environment

FE : Formal Environment

ESL : English as Second Language

e.g. : Example

i.e. : That is

UMS
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

# LIST OF APPENDICES


| | | Page |
|---|---|---|
| Appendix A | Interview Transcript (Formal Environment) | 129 |
| Appendix B | Interview Transcript (Informal Environment) | 157 |
| Appendix C | Questionnaire Form | 182 |


UMS
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

As the world embraces globalization, English language plays an important part as one of the languages used for communication. Essentially it has established itself as a language that is currently used all over the world. With the outburst of technological development, English has played even a greater role in many fields. One of the most affected sectors is the education sector. In the modern world, most schools adopted the English language as one of the subjects learned in school. This is because the world leaders know the importance of English language in global communication. As English is widely used by people of the world, it helps to connect people from around the world; this is manifested in the use of the Internet.

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In Malaysia, English language was introduced with the coming of the British Empire. It was first used as a medium of communication between the British colonist and the local and today, English plays a role in connecting the multicultural society of Malaysia. Aside from being used in communication, Faisal (2006) highlighted the impact of English language in the advancement and growth of Malaysia in areas such as business, employment, education, politics, tourism, law, media and translation domains. Considering the areas affected by English language in the growth of the nation, one can say that English has indeed contributed and could be a major factor in developing a country. Nesamalar et al. (1995: 1) stated that English in Malaysia was significantly important to all fields:

*"It is taught in both the primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. Its position is that of a second language. It is a means of communication in certain everyday activities and certain job situations. It enables Malaysian to engage meaningfully an additional means of access to academic, professional, and recreational material."*

(Nesamalar et al, 1995:1)

## 1.2 Background of the Study

English has been a part of the Malaysian education since the colonial times and has evolved to a phase where it is now one of the important aspects of learning in Malaysia. Many reference books used in Malaysia's academic institutions are still in English. Most Malaysian private universities and colleges also use English language as their medium of instructions. Being called the language of science and technology also helps in the widespread of English language in the education system. In spite of these facts, most language learners are still not proficient enough in using English language fluently.

Apart from English language in institutes of higher learning, Malaysian students have gone through 11 years of learning English as a subject in school, yet they still do not achieve a reasonable level of English literacy (Normazidah et.al, 2012). A study conducted by the Higher Education Ministry discovered that 93% of Malaysian university students are under the level five (good) of the Malaysian University English Test (Muet) (Atan, 2007).Even with the result, we are not in the position to say that all students who hail from Malaysian schools are poor in English language and some of the students show excellent English language skills. The implementation of PPSMI (the teaching and learning of science and mathematics in English) by the government failed to produce more English proficient students and in 2012 the government announced a policy reversal (Utusan Harian, 2009).

Ainol et al (2009) stated the importance of English as a foreign language albeit a second language in economic development as:

*"In an increasingly interdependent world, knowledge of foreign language is seen not only as an added advantage which become crucial in accessing foreign technology but also is systematically associated with one's meaningful and constructive engagement in politics, security, global trade and education. It has become an economic commodity. In order to participate in the global economy, one has to be adequately equipped with the ability, knowledge, skills, and attitude to understand and communicate effectively. Consistently, educational leader have been emphasizing the need to foster foreign language competency among student"* (Ainol. 2009 : 73)

A survey by the Malaysian government in 2005 identified almost 60000 Malaysian graduates who were not employed with the reason being 'poor command of English language with inadequate communication skills' (News Straits Times November 10, 2005). This could only mean that employers need workers who are proficient and able to use the English language efficiently in their organization. President of Federation of Malaysia Manufacturer Tan Sri Mustafa Mansur, in stating the importance of being proficient in English language, points out that:

*"In manufacturing, proficiency in English may not be as important as for someone working in the legal or financial field but we still need people who can communicate well because sometimes we need to send people out to negotiate deals and get contracts signed. If they cannot communicate well in English, we will lose out," (The Star, 2011c)*

Because of the lack of proficiency among Malaysian graduates, this has come to the case of employment in Malaysia. Employing more proficient English speakers has become a must within the employment sector. A survey by Malaysian Employer Federation (MEF) in 2010 revealed that most companies surveyed chose communication skills as the most sought after quality required in job applicants among others such as experience, interpersonal skills, passion and commitment (The Star, 2011).

Local and international companies have trouble getting fresh graduates with adequate language proficiency. Interviewers often meet graduates with excellent grades on their language examination but at the same time are frustrated by how the graduates are having trouble in using simple English. It is also identified that one of

the reasons this happens is that when a language learner goes back home after school they have nobody to practice with. Also, one of the factors is that the learner may not even be exposed to situations where English is used, such as the media (The Borneo Post, 2014).

## 1.3 Problem Statement

In second language learning, it is not a mystery that some learners can learn and acquire a language more quickly and easily than other learners. This is a fact that is known by the second language learners themselves. But this situation is driven by two factors that help the process of developing second language itself; internal factors and external factors. The internal factors can be noted as those relating to the learner himself/herself such as age, personality, motivation experience, cognition and native language. While the external factors are the factors that are beyond the language learner themselves such as curriculum, instruction, culture status, motivation and access to native speakers (Shoebottom, n.d.)

Learning in a different environment can bring about different results. Krashen and Seliger (1975) describe two learning environments: the formal learning environment and the informal learning environment. Krashen and Seliger describe formal learning as institutionalized learning where the learner learns language consciously, while informal learning environment takes place in real life situations and learners learn language subconsciously. Rogers (2003) also formulated and set out two contrasting approaches to learning that were also based on the consciousness of the learner as described by Krashen and Seliger: task-conscious or acquisition learning and learning-conscious or formalized learning. Task-conscious or acquisition learning can be seen on-going process (Roger, 2003). Rodger also suggested that it might be better to speak of it as having a consciousness in the task. Learner may not be conscious of learning but learners are usually aware of what the specific task they are doing. Learning-conscious or formalized learning is deeply rooted in the process of facilitating learning. It takes the form of 'educative learning' instead of 'experience learning'. Conscious learning is where learner is aware that they are engaging the process of learning. Conscious learning also involves guided episodes of learning.

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The notion of formal and informal language learning environments was also defined by Eraut (2000) who described the formal learning environment through certain criteria: "A prescribed learning framework, organized learning event or package, the presence of a designated teacher or trainer, the award of a qualification or credit and the external specification of outcomes". While Beckett and Hager (2002) describe informal language learning as:"Practice-based informal learning is organic / holistic, practice-based informal learning is contextual, practice-based informal learning is activity and experience-based, practice-based informal learning occurs in situations where learning is not the main aim, practice-based informal workplace learning is activated by individual learners rather than by teachers / trainers and practice-based informal workplace learning is often collaborative/ collegial.

It is not the question of which type of learning environment is the superior one but which environment helps English users to further acquire their second language skills and provide an exposure to practical usage of the second language they learned. However, Martin (1980) and Yener Gulmez and Shresta (1993) suggest that ESL learners can develop their communication skills through exposure toward the use of the language itself without them having to go through the formal learning environment. Spada (1984) find that formal learning environment affects some aspect of language development.

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Informal language learning takes place especially in the tourism sector where it nourishes language learner proficiency. Learner can enhance their English proficiency by communicating and providing information, especially to foreign tourists. While it is hard for a learner to master the foreign language, with a keen interest learners will be able to communicate with tourists through day to day practice. (NST, 2015)

In informal language environments, aside from using communication as a medium to interact and learning, media technology also contributes its part in enhancing learner language development. Research has shown that media technology can help learner in their language learning (Taher Bahrani and Tam Shu Sim: 2012, Reetinder Joshi and Gurpreet kaur: 2011, Chung and Huang: 1998, Guillory: 1998).

Language learning is a non-stop process and that has no defined end point. Some learners will continue learning language in higher learning institutions. Some who do not have the same opportunity will also continue their learning, because learning is a continuous process and is not bounded by things such as institutions. Thus, this study is conducted to serve as a reference for researchers to address the issue of learning environments and its effects towards ESL communication skills development.

The government is also one of the sources to the problem of Malaysia language learners as the change of the medium of instruction in the education has created trouble for Malaysia universities. Chan and Wong (2004) in Ramiza Darmi and Albion (2013:1) stated that "*competence in English among learners has been on the decline since a change in language policy was enforced, causing the medium of instruction to change from English to Bahasa Malaysia in 1970*". The decline has affected the learner's competence in the English language thus contributed to the number of unemployed graduates (Chan and Helen, 2006).

An English language assessment (ELA) made by Jobstreet.com ranked Malaysia third in Southeast Asia in term of English proficiency. This means that Malaysian is not on par with some of the neighbouring countries such as Singapore and the Philippines (The Star, 2011b). Consisting of 40 random questions, the English Language Assessment test was to evaluate individual's grasp of the English language. The result of the test shows that most Malaysian workers scored higher than those of fresh graduates and thus concluded that local Malaysian graduates lacked English proficiency. This entices a notion that workers in Malaysia have better English proficiency than those of fresh graduate.

Even after learning English for 11 years and graduation from secondary school many Malaysian students do not do well in the subject (Azizi et al., 2011). In 2007 a study was conducted by The Higher Education Ministry to gauge the level of English Proficiency level among lecturers and students of local universities. In its preliminary findings it was found that 29% of 132,000 university students were either at "level One or Level Two" - the lowest in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Among the students, only 43% are at level three (Average), 21 % at Level Four (Satisfactory), 5% at Level Five (Good) and lastly 2% are at Level Six (Excellent). To

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improve the low-level proficiency among university students, local universities have carried out programmes or courses that would help students and lecturers in mastering their English language (Atan, 2007). For Malaysian University graduates who have ventured into the working world, even competent university students with a Band 6 Malaysian University English test (MUET) in reading were unable to complete a task that requires higher order reading comprehension skills such as writing proposal or reports (Isarji and Ainol, 2008)

Lim Soh Lan (1994) in his paper entitled *'fluency and accuracy in spoken English –implications for classroom practice in a bilingual context'* conducted a survey on 88 in-service English language teachers in the University of Malaya. The findings from the survey were:

1. Most of the respondents agreed that learners were not able to speak English fluently. This includes students from upper secondary school and tertiary institutions.
2. Half of the respondents named speaking skill as the weakest skill from all four skills.

He also identified three causes for low spoken English proficiency for Malaysian English language learners.

1. Widespread use of Bahasa Malaysia in teacher talk in EFL class.
2. Use of mother tongue and shared language in peer-interaction.
3. Motor-perceptive nature of speaking activities.

All of the causes that have been listed are connected to the influence of the first language towards learner second language learning. This has shown that even with formal classes, most of them are still weak in mastering the fluency of speaking skill.

The question of 'why is the English of workers better than fresh graduates' can be answered by looking at the environment where these learners learn and use their English language.

## 1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

This research aims to investigate the roles of the different learning environment in the acquisition of second language.

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