The Successes and Challenges in English Language Learning Experiences of Postgraduate International Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

The number of international students flooding into Malaysian's educational landscape has increased rather tremendously. These international students come from various countries with majority from the Middle East region. Coming from different countries and having diverse backgrounds, these international students have to inevitably experience changes. One of the changes is the use of English as a medium of instruction in the institutions where they pursue their postgraduate studies in. The situation in Malaysia is unique because the country provides a hybrid-language environment where the first language is Bahasa Melayu, the national language of Malaysia, and the second language is English. The hybridity of the language environment is the impetus of the study. The study was embarked on to explore the English language learning experiences of nine international students studying in an institution in Malaysia. These participants were from Iraq, Iran, Libya, Palestine, Bahrain and Indonesia. The study was under the qualitative paradigm and thus, the data collection methods included document analysis and interviews. The participants shared their experiences learning English out-of class through their weekly online postings on Google+ throughout the semester and two rounds of interviews – in the beginning and after the end of the semester. The management of data was done by utilising ATLAS.ti software and the data analysis was guided by the six-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings reveal that they encountered both successes and challenges in learning and practising the English language. More specifically, the successes and challenges are categorised under three themes – opportunities, feelings and progress. Therefore, the subthemes are seized opportunities, positive feelings and progress for successes; while missed opportunities, negative feelings and slow progress are the subthemes for challenges. The overall finding is, although Malaysia is a hybrid-language environment which uses English only as the second language, the participants experienced more successes than challenges in their English language learning. In terms of theme one (opportunities); the findings are participants seized opportunities to practise English by accomplishing tasks, and they missed the opportunities to practise English due to lack of time and the different nature of the English language from their mother tongue. As for theme two (feelings); the findings are participants' feelings were positive when they felt confident, had a good time learning English and obtained encouraging results, however, their feelings were otherwise when they felt frustrated with the class, people around them and also themselves. The findings for theme three (progress) are the participants experienced progress when they felt that they have improved and they achieved good results in their English course, on the other hand, they felt slow progress when there was little improvement and there were still unsolved English problems.

Keywords: English language learning experiences, international students, Malaysia, hybrid-language environment

Introduction

International students (ISs henceforth) are defined as the students who are residing in a foreign country for tertiary study (Ryan & Caroll, 2005). They are the sojourners who usually choose to go to traditional host countries like The United Kingdom, The United States of America and Australia (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). However, more ISs have spread out to emerging host countries like Malaysia. In 2010, it was reported that 86 923 number of ISs from 150 countries were in Malaysia pursuing their studies (Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) Statistics, 2010) and the number has been increasing. This is in line with the Malaysia's vision of being host to 200,000 ISs in 2020 (Chi, 2011).

Coming from a foreign land, ISs bring in their culture, language, perception of life and many more which might be different or even contradict with what the host country has to offer. Thus, change is inevitable for them. Berry et al. (1987) list five general aspects of changes that sojourners might face: physical changes like a new place to live; cultural changes; different sets of social relationships; biological changes like new nutritional status and changes in one's psychology, behaviour and mental health status. For some sojourners, these would be too much to handle as seen in studies done by Andrade (2006), Sawir (2005), Novera (2004), and Guilfoyle and Harryba (2009). Andrade (2006) talks about adjustment of sojourners in Canada but shares the same sentiment with Sawir's (2006) study which was conducted in Australia. Both sets of participants in the studies complain about English usage. Novera (2006) points out how Indonesians and Moslems have difficulty to perform their five times prayer in Australia just due to the inexistence of suitable ablution place. Participants in Guilfoyle and Harryba (2009) are from Seychelles and they reveal about their interactions with the lecturers in a western university. From the studies highlighted, it depicts that ISs experience different issues of incompatibility between what they are used to and with what they have, and have to do in the new place.

As pointed out, ISs in English-speaking countries like Canada and Australia face English language problems and this situation is also similar in Malaysia. Although Malaysia is not an English-speaking country; it is unique in terms of its language as it provides a hybrid-language environment where the main language is Malay, while the second language is English. Extant literature on ISs in Malaysia has shed light on the issue of English language problems among ISs. Studies by Manjula and Slethaug (2011), Zuria et al. (2010), Khairi and Rechards (2010,) and Mousavi and Kashefian-Naeeni (2011) have proven that. Among the eight challenges listed, respondents in Manjula and Slethaug's (2011) study have chosen English language as challenge number two. Moreover, Zuria and her colleagues (2010) have gathered complaints from their participants concerning English in Malaysia. They said that Malaysians spoke English with a Malay accent and there seemed to be a lack of English usage on signage and documents. In addition, Khairi and Rechards (2010) administered a questionnaire to Arab ISs in five universities in Malaysia and one of the findings reveals that English language class has been poorly conducted. In line with that, the participants in Mousavi and Kashefian-Naeeni's (2011) study specify that they have problem in doing academic writing as they have difficulties to express their own voices and concepts when they write in English.

All the abovementioned studies reported having only one round of data collection. In other words, there was no prolonged engagement with the respondents or participants involved. Manjula and Slethaug (2011) and Khairi and Rechards (2010) distributed questionnaires; while Zuria and her colleagues (2011) conducted one round of focus-group interview with several groups, and Mousavi and Kashefian-Naeeni (2011) had one round of interview with their ten participants individually. This study, however, is underpinned by the notion of prolonged engagement. The researchers followed nine participants for a semester to really understand the experiences that they underwent in learning English in Malaysia.

The Study

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explicate the international students' (ISs) experiences of English language learning in Malaysia. Thus one research question was generated – What are the successes and challenges in English language learning experienced by ISs in Malaysia? This research question became a guide in designing the study.

Methods

The research question posted is explorative in nature. Hence, the design of this study was viewed through the qualitative lens. Two methods were employed to find answer to the research question – document analysis and interview. The document analysis was made up of the participants' online postings on Google+ as their weekly reflections on their English language learning. The data from online postings were triangulated with the data from the two rounds of interviews done with the students. The first interview was at the beginning of the semester while the second interview was after the semester was over.

Participants

They were nine participants involved in this study. All of them were pursuing their postgraduate studies in an institution in Malaysia. Four were doing their doctorate studies while five were undergoing their master's courses. Six were majoring

in sciences and three were doing social sciences. At the time of the study, all of them were undergoing an English language proficiency course at the institution. They came from Iraq (3), Iran (1), Palestine (1), Algeria (1), Bahrain (1), Libya (1) and Indonesia (1). Six were males whereas three were females. Their ages ranged from 22 to 39 years old. Four were married while five were single. Two were staying on campus while the rest were living off campus.

Data analysis

The data were managed by using ATLAS.ti software. The themes, subthemes and sub subthemes emerged from the data through a six-step thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Procedure of data collection

The nine participants were recruited through purposive sampling in the beginning of the semester. They started posting their weekly reflections on their English language learning experiences on Google+. More detailed explanation on the procedure of utilising Google+ was reported elsewhere (in Noor Saazai et al., 2014). Then they were invited for the first round of the interview. After the semester was over, they were invited for the second round of the interview. Both interviews were focusing on getting in depth information based on the reflections they shared online on Google+.

Results

This section begins with the definition on success and challenge as the keywords in the research question. It is then followed by the output from ATLAS.ti which reveals the three themes. Each theme is to be deliberated with data extracts from the online postings and two rounds of the interviews. An example is; "practise, practise" (Faizah_Indonesia, int_1). The information in the parantheses refers to the participant (pseudonym), the country of origin, and the source of the data extract. 'int_1' refers to interview round one, whereas 'op_ref' refers to the reflections on online postings. Further, the data extract is verbatim and authentic, thus, it might contain errors. Some corrections were made and words were added to ease comprehension. The amended and added words are found in [...].

Successes and challenges were experienced by the participants in the learning environment. A success can be defined as any specific or general incident reported by participants concerning their positive development in their English language learning experiences (ELLEs) in Malaysia. This includes good results, positive feelings, and ability to accomplish tasks related to English usage. On the other hand, a challenge is a specific or general problem/hardship reported by participants in their ELLEs in Malaysia. This includes complaints about the lack of time due to busy schedule and also about problems in communication. Figure 1 displays the three main themes for the stipulated research question..

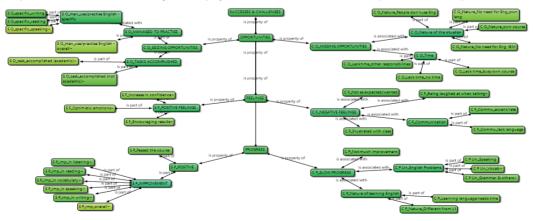

Figure 1 Themes in network view ATLAS.ti

Figure 1 is a network view which is an output from ATLAS.ti. It shows that the three main themes are related to opportunities, feelings and progress. Each theme addresses two sides of the coin – successes and challenges. Numerically, it can be seen from figure 1 that there are more challenges than successes. However, there are actually many
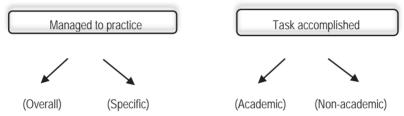
variations of challenges. Counting the number of reported cases (based on the number of data extracts) for both successes and challenges, the former has 179 cases while the latter has 130 cases. Hence, it can be said that the participants experienced more successes than challenges in their English langauge learning in Malaysia.

Theme 1 - Opportunities

| Seizing Opportunities | | Missing opportunities |

The successes were felt by the participants when they were able to seize the opportunities to practise using English and accomplish a task (academic or non-academic). The reported opportunities were to practise English overall (general) and specific (speaking, writing and reading). On the other hand, they felt that they faced challenges when they missed the opportunities to practise using English. Their challenges were related to time and also to the nature of the situation. The subtheme of seizing opportunities is discussed first.

Success – Seizing opportunities

| Managed to practice | | Task accomplished |

| (Overall) | (Specific) | (Academic) | (Non-academic) |

Participants associated practising and using English as evidence of success. Thus, they seized the opportunities to practise using English; either overall or skill-based, and to accomplish a task; either academic or non-academic. In seizing the opportunities, Nabil reported on having an overall practice of "us[ing] language in the markets and street and trying developed through follow the news and watch movies" (Nabil, int_2). However, he relayed a more specific activity in his first interview about writing messages "sometimes every day I send message in English" (Nabil, int_1). Besides feeling successful in practising writing, there were other skills like reading and speaking that had been reported by Mohsin and Faizal. Mohsin announced that he had started reading news in English. He wrote "I start reading [E]nglish news…☺" (Mohsin, op_ref). In addition, Faizal practised his speaking when he assisted someone to find his/her way. He reported:

> *He ask [I do not know the way how I go out from the university] so I help him and show him the road and make the driver of bus help him. So I think I'm better in English week after week. (Faizal, op_ref)*

Another aspect that stirs the feeling of success in the ELLEs among the participants is when they were able to accomplish a task – be it academic or non-academic. For the former, Shamsulwahab talked about his experience in doing presentation in English for his research methodology class. It is seen in the exchanges below:

End of research methodology. Each student from each department do the presentation about his or them err...research proposal. What you do in your research. At the end of this research methodology. Therefore, there are 2 or 3 from … staff department, professors and any student, each student and come

Using powerpoint

Yeah. And give what you research. What you do in your research.

You presented in English?

Yeah. What is the idea in your research. Then the student start to explain his or her research. (Shamsulwahab, int_2).

As for the examples of the non-academic accomplishment, Nabil relayed his encounters in handling his problem with the bank and making a report about a stolen laptop at the police station and that he proudly declared that he "explained to them the situation and what happened and, of course, we are speaking in English" (Nabil, op_ref).

To sum up, they reported seizing the opportunities to practise English overall or in general and specific - according to the macro skills of speaking, writing and reading. Furthermore, they also took the opportunities to accomplish tasks, both academic and non-academic.

Challenges – Missing opportunities

On the other hand, they felt that they faced challenges when they missed the opportunities to practise using English. Their challenges were related to time (no time and busy with own course and other responsibilities) and due to the nature of the situation in terms of language usage, their own issues, and also connected to their main focus which was on their own course.

Time is seen insufficient due to three aspects. Firstly, the participants were attending courses at the faculty and their ongoing research. They became too occupied with their own course to even take the opportunity to learn English when the opportunity presented itself. Faizah had a friend who could teach her writing but "because he study, I study – have busy schedule" thus, she only managed to learn writing "just one time…but after that no more" (Faizah, int_1).

Secondly, the participants complained of not having time to do activities they knew would benefit their language learning like talking and practising English with people (Imran, int_2, Shamsulwahab, int_2), using the dictionary (Fatinmalik, int_2), writing online (Fairus, int_1), and even going out to watch a movie (Fatinmalik, int_1;Fairus, int_1). Fairus expressed this complaint very aptly:

I think better movies to learn than by news because they don't speak very fast.

Have you tried watching movies and learning English at the same time?

Yes. I have tried. But now I don't have time. (Fairus, int_1)

The third point in relation to the lack of time is due to other responsibilities that they had. These participants are adults and their sole focus at the time of the study was not just studying. Basri was an Arabic teacher who worked "from 8.30 to 4" (Basri, int_2) at an international school, whereas the married female participants were occupied with their duties as mothers, especially Fatinmalik whose four children had tests or exams. She uttered, "…so I must learn [teach] them" (Fatinmalik, int_2).

Participants admitted missing the opportunities to use English because of the nature of the situations they were in. The first is concerning language. There were times when there was no need for the use of English as illustrated by the three extracts below:

Extract 1:**Ok. When you talk to her you speak Arabic or English?**

No we speak Arabic because faster…(laughs)…to understand. (Fairus, int_1)

Extract 2:Small shop

Is it like a grocery

Small. Everyone is Indonesian…so it is Malay. (Basri, int_1)

Extract 3:**You don't talk?**

No. The one time I talked to them, they don't know English

Who?

Students. Maybe study degree but in Arabic or Malay. So they don't know English. (Faizal, int_1)

Extract 1 highlights the reason why Arabic was used instead of English while the other two extracts show that it was the people around them who preferred Malay or the lack the command of the English language of the other party made the participants miss the opportunity to speak English.

Another challenge for them is due to the nature of their own course. Those participants who were concurrently doing research and undergoing courses which did not emphasise on the use of English like Islamic Studies and Mathematics also lost their chance to practise and use English. Imran's discipline which is Quran and Sunnah does not require extensive English due to the nature of the course itself. He expressed that "I find that the use of the English language in my studies of the Arabic language somewhat difficult, because I cannot translate the Koran, the Hadith, or poems, they lose their value" (Imran, int_1). Moreover, Fatinmalik also communicated about her mathematics major as seen in the interview dialogue below:

Yeah..only I try to choose only mathematical subject , so there's no…

Little use of English (Fatinmalik, int_2)

Participants also missed the opportunities to use and practise the language as being individuals, they have their own unique issues like experienced by Faizah. She is an international student. However, being an Indonesian whose looks are similar to a Malaysian; she was always spoken to in Malay and not in English; "I think like the office…all of them talk Malay with me" (Faizah, int_2). This was of course an advantage for her but this lessened her chance to practise speaking English.

All in all, the challenges faced by the participants could be summarised into two groups – the lack of time due to some issues, and the nature of some of the situations that were not really facilitating in their English language learning.

Theme 2 – Feelings

Positive Feelings	Negative Feelings

The participants' successes and challenges are parallel to their feelings. It was a success when they felt very positive about their experience like when their confidence increased and they obtained encouraging results. Their positive feelings were also evident when they associated learning English with optimistic emotions. However, their feelings were negative when they faced challenges in terms of problems in communication, frustration with class, being laughed at when talking and when their level was not as expected.

Successes – Positive feelings

Increase in confidence	Optimistic emotions	Encouraging results

The participants' positive feelings include the increase of confidence that they felt. Further, they also felt happy with English and associated English language learning experiences (ELLEs) with positively-connotated emotions. Another aspect that enlightened them was when they obtained encouraging results in their assessments.

The participants expressed their feeling of confidence especially when it came to speaking. Almost all mentioned that they felt more confident in dealing with people and doing presentations. In fact, a few like Fairus, Basri and Nabil actually said and wrote about it in more than one instance. The two following extracts show Fairus expressing her confidence in her reflections and in interview 2. She wrote "currently I am more confident about my ability to speak in English (Fairus, op_ref) and she said that she had "more confident for the talking English, in syaa Allah" (Fairus, int_2).

Some linked their confidence to the specific English language experiences that they had gone through like Basri who started working in an international school in Gombak and Shamsulwahab and Fatinmalik who had the chance to participate in an international conference. Basri shared how working at the international school had changed him. He said:

> *before I move to IS [International School], I never open, I did but, like my friend talk with some foreigners in English, I just become silent. I don't know how come talk. Even I know, I want to share something, but I cannot. But after that, no, I became brave and talk.*   *(Basri, int_1)*

Furthermore, Fatinmalik conveyed her gratitude to Allah Almighty when she came back from her first conference. This is seen in the exchanges below:

That's very good. So that makes you feel more confident

Alhamdulillah

Sure. So that would be one of your successes

Umm..Alhamdulillah. This is the first conference for me (Fatinmalik, int_2)

Shamsulwahab also became more confident after presenting at an international conference. He said that he admitted feeling more confident than ever (Shamsulwahab, int_2).

Besides confidence, participants conveyed other optimistic emotions about their experience in English language learning. Words and phrases like "good", "easy", "happy", "comfortable", "desire to speak more", "fun", "enjoy", "nice", "enthusiasm", "wonderful", and "useful" that were uttered in the interviews and penned in their online postings denote the optimism they felt in the experience of learning the language. Among them Nabil had been the most constant in reporting his positive feelings. He wrote in two of the weekly reflections, and conveyed in interview 2. The positive words are underlined in the extracts below:

First I enjoy to take a course of English in UKM, to improve and develop myself. (Nabil, op_ref)

In fact, I feel <u>wonderful</u> that I finished English course and I feel positive about the course because it was at the university and does not affect my studies. (Nabil, int_2)

In Tuesday I met some persons from Afghanistan and they were speaking English well, so i was happy because i want talk and mingled with them a lot. (Nabil, op_ref)

The positive feelings were also evoked by the encouraging results that they got. Below are two extracts from Nabil's reflections and Shamsulwahab's interview. Nabil wrote about his result for one of the assessments for the Oral Communication Module which was done in the middle of the semester: "Speaking: Last week was impromptu speech. I got 18.5 from 20, its good marks Alhamdulillah" (Nabil, op_ref). Shamsulwahab, on the other hand, reported about his final results as good. He said "about results of English semester, yes I am happy because I get good results in speaking writing [and] reading" (Shamsulwahab, int_2).

All in all these positive feelings were an accumulation of confidence, optimistic feelings and good results.

Challenges – Negative feelings

Participants reported variety of negative feelings that stem from aspects like the management of the classroom, the attitude of the people, and also their own unfulfilled expectations and problems in communicating. Firstly, the feeling of frustration like felt by Fairus was due to her opinion that classroom management needed improvement as things were too easy in class and thus, she suggested that the students with different levels be separated. This is seen in dialogues below:

Not everybody is at the same level, some lower so lecturers need to make changes

But in this case, some of them will improve his level but another just a bit, just he will do, he will attend in the class. I mean it is my suggest that it is better if they separate, for example, the students who come from Islamic and Arabic or something and the students who come from Science

You are talking about the academic majors. People from FPI [Islamic Studies] for example are not going to write their thesis in English, so they are not worried

Yes (Fairus, int_2)

Secondly, the attitude of the people that they dealt with also caused discomfort among the participants. Faizal complained about one of the staff at the residential college was "laughing at [him]"(Faizal, int_1) when he made an inquiry about the accommodation. Further, Faizah expressed that her friend laughed when she "want[ed] to talk in English" (Faizah, int_1).

The third aspect that causes undesirable feelings concerns the participants' own self-fulfillment. Shamsulwahab felt that his level had "not arrive[d] to the level that [he] wants to arrive" (ShamsulWahab, int_1) when asked about his ability to read journals and write in English. Some participants found difficulties in their everyday communication as they admitted lacking in the English language command (Basri, op_ref & int_1), (Faizah, op_ref & int_1), (ShamsulWahab, int_1) and (Imran, op_top4). Besides that, they also mentioned other problems in communication and also listening due the accent and the rate as expressed by Faizal:
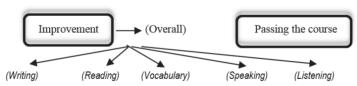
when I came here I can understand foreigners when they talk between each other, but I can't understand [M]alaysian people when they talk [E]nglish .I found it difficult to speak with them because the axent [accent] not like [E]nglish axent [accent] (Faizal, op_ref)

To sum up, the participants felt very negative when they were frustrated. Their frustrations emerged from their experiences in class, talking to people and also with themselves when they did not reach the level they wanted.

Theme 3 - Progress

The participants experienced progress in their English language learning. Progress was equivalent to being successful, whereas it was considered a challenge when it was slow. All reported cases of progress were associated with the participants' improvement and also their passing of the English Language Proficiency course. However, the participants' slow progress included reported cases of not much improvement, unsolved English problems and complaints on the nature of learning the English language itself.

Successes – Progress

Many participants mentioned that they experienced progress on the whole and also when they passed their MKBI. For the former, most of them used the word 'better' and to emphasise Nabil stated that "[his] level of English is becoming better and becoming better" (Nabil, int_2). Basri went further to illustrate how he had noticed his overall improvement because he no longer asked for his friend's aid. He wrote, "[a]fter almost one year i tried to learn English at home by my self, and time by time i improved my English little a bit, so reduce my disturbing for my friends, because before that i disturb them by my questions" (Basri, op_ref). He further added that "[t]he time for thinking is reduced by day. So just talk and it is like improve" (Basri, int_1). There are also participants who made a clear comparison between before (in home country) and after being exposed to English learning in Malaysia as to show that they had progressed. The phrase that denotes comparison is underlined in each of the following extracts. Imran stated that "I feel that the English language have better than it was" (Imran, op_ref). Mohsin also said a similar point in interview 2: "Because my English is very better than the past" (Mohsin, int_2). Nabil was more expressive when he wrote, "Actually when I came to Malaysia until now I learned a lot in English and evolved more than before" (Nabil, op_ref).

Besides reporting on their overall progress, the participants were also specific about the progress in their macro-skills and vocabulary. Nabil opined that he had progressed in his writing skills, "My opinion is now in writing skills have become stronger and write faster and better" (Nabil, int_2). Shamsulwahab expressed gaining experience in tackling different types of reading materials:

> I think because I enter to this course, I think some experience develop my experience in English…in reading also I have or get good experience for reading, methods for reading especially how I read, what is the method for read papers, books, newspaper, there are some methods for each type of reading for this style. (ShamsulWahab, int_2)

As for vocabulary, Fairus explained how doing online postings every week had helped her to memorise the vocabulary:

> As well as my vocabulary, I research, I write, with my vocabulary. But emm…I should do correct so when I correct once, another time I didn't need. I know already by the practice because the topic general then weekly nearly 17 or 18 it is good for learning and memorise the vocabulary. (Fairus, int_2)

Mohsin compared his ability to speak English before joining MKBI and at the end of the semester, when MKBI was over. He said:

> Before of the semester, I couldn't speak English very well. My main weakness was speaking and how use grammars in my speaking. But today I think it is better than the past. (Mohsin, int_2)

For the skill of listening, Nabil felt happy as he became more focused in using the skill. He wrote:

> This week I watched two films, the first film was about tornado wreak havoc in the ground, and the other was comical and talking about the life of a family. I felt like I became a focus more on listening to the words. And I'm happy with this progress. (Nabil, op_ref)

The cases of improvement above are reported by the participants themselves, thus they are self-reported progress. As to make the notion of progress more concrete, below are the hard data depicted in Table 1.

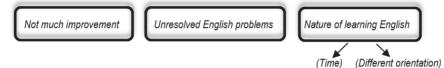Table 1 Participants' results before and after the English Language Proficiency Course

Participants – Faculty	Overall results before the course. (Band)	Results after the course (Bands for Oral Communication – Reading – Writing)
Basri - Islamic Studies	2	5-3-4
Fatinmalik – Mathematics	2	5-4-4
Faizah – Islamic Studies	2	4-3-4
Fairus – Computer	2	5-5-4
Imran – Islamic Studies	1	4-4-3
Mohsin – Computer	2	4-5-4
Nabil – Computer	2	5-4-4
Faizal – Engineering	2	5-5-4
Shamsulwahab - Engineering	2	5-5-4

Table 1 shows the participants' overall results before the English language course and after the course. The latter is broken down according to modules. The results are ranged from band 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest band. The participants got bands 1 and 2 earlier and they had to achieve either band 3 or 4 for each module at the end of the course in order to pass the course. Band 3 for students from Islamic Studies while band 4 for the others.

All in all, participants had shown progress in their English language learning. This is evinced from the data extracts from their interviews and online postings, as well as results of their English language proficiency course.

Challenges – Slow progress

Not much improvementUnresolved English problems   Nature of learning English

Not much improvement	Unresolved English problems	Nature of learning English

(Time)   (Different orientation)

In contrast to the progress like improvement and passing the course as discussed earlier, at times the participants experienced slow progress.   They saw it as a challenge when they showed not much improvement and when they still faced problems in certain parts of the language. Another contributor to their slow progress was the nature of the English language itself as seen from the participants' perceptions.

Concerning the slow progress, a few participants expressed that they "didn't improve a lot" (Fairus, int_2), and Faizah even said "no improvement" (Faizah, int_2). Faizal, however, offered some explanation on his little progress as only "add[ing] little details" to what he already knew. Hence not really pushing the command of his language to a higher level. Some of them articulated their slow progress by highlighting the problems that they had in certain skills like grammar and speaking (Mohsin, op_ref), and vocabulary (Shamsulwahab, int_2). For Shamsulwahab, however, the vocabulary that he was referring to was for the common everyday words which he termed as 'in the road'. He had no problem with the jargon from his engineering subjects "[i]n my field, no, I don't have problem in vocab. But in the road" (Shamsulwahab, int_2). This could be a problem at the moment of the study because the focus of the course was on general and academic English and not looking at any specific subject. One might think how one could be good in English in one's field but not everyday English. In the case of Shamsulwahab, it was proven that he truly had no difficulty in using the language in his field as he had presented at two conferences; one was oral presentation while the other was a poster presentation (Shamsulwahab, int_2).

Participants related their slow progress to the nature of learning a language. Imran, for example complained that "English language learning needs to take a long time and continuous efforts" (Imran, op_ref). Other participants also made comments along the same line. Fatinmalik, Basri and Faizah believed that with more time they could progress better. Fatinmalik grumbled that "we have only 2 or 2-3 hours in a week but I think not long time. Not enough time. Enough time maybe we learn more" (FatinMalik, int_1). Similarly, Faizah also complained about having the English language proficiency course for only one semester. Basri proposed that "[l]anguage needs many years" (Basri, int_1). Fairus, on the other hand, took the matter rather adversely. She exclaimed, "[b]ut sometimes I hate English because I take long time to studying it. (Fairus, int_1). She further pinpointed spelling as the area that was most troublesome: "I think spelling words take the most, the longest time of learning English is the spelling" (Fairus, int_2). While based on his observation, Mohsin supposed that his sister became a good speaker of English due to her experience staying here in Malaysia longer than him. Below is the data extract from interview 1:

So what do you think makes your sister very good in English

Eerrr….I think her experience is the most important. Because she lives around 2 years…..around 3 years

(Mohsin, int_1)

Further, Basri made an interesting analogy when he compared learning English in this instance, to driving a car, "[i]t takes a long time cause language is like to drive car" (Basri, int_1). In a different part of the interview he illustrated that when driving a car, one has to "sit, [check the] mirror, don't forget the mirror. How? Give direction, yes...and the gear, put to right, you have to memorise everything" (Basri, int_1). He further elucidated that it is similar to learning English because there are many concepts to consider in constructing even one correct sentence. Hence, just like driving, learning English requires time in order to allow for familiarity of skills which then leads to automaticity of using the language. All preceding quotations in this section boil down to the need for time in learning English. It can be surmised that time is needed to be good at a language.

Another contributor to their slow progress is the difference in the orientation of their first language and English. One observation was on the error of capitalisation as seen in the data extract - "Also My father, a professor in Islamic, but he entered…" (Nabil, int_2). This is taken from an email interview which was conducted with Nabil. This might be a typing

error as his other my's were correctly typed; but it is an interesting coincidence. The examples above are for Arabic speaking participants. There is one Persian speaker among the participants but the majority of them are Arabic speakers including the Indonesian.

In summary, the slow progress was experienced by the participants when they felt that they did not advance much in their English language learning. This might also be due to the nature of the English language itself.

Discussion

The main reason for the participants to experience both successes and challenges can be generally attributed to the hybridity of language in Malaysia. Participants experienced success when they seized opportunities to practise English, had positive feelings, and felt that they were progressing. On the other hand, it became a challenge to them when they missed the opportunities to use English, had negative feelings, and felt that they were too slow in learning English. In more detail, it is shown from the data extracts that participants could practise speaking in English with the people on the street, bus driver, people in charge at the bank and the police station. Moreover, participants could watch English movies and read English newspapers. All these are possible because English is a second language in Malaysia. On the other hand, some parts of the challenges they faced might be due to the inability of people in Malaysia to converse well in English like reported under the subthemes of missing opportunities and negative feelings.

Referring to extant literature, having opportunities is an important entity in language learning. Spolsky (1989) highlights two conditions that emphasise on opportunities. Conditions number 62 and 63. The former is opportunity for practice condition where learning a language involves an opportunity for the new skills to be practised; the result is fluency. The latter is communication condition where the language is being used for communication, thus more opportunities exist for practices. From these two conditions, it is understood that when learners practise using the target language, they will be more fluent (condition 62), and when the target language is used to communicate, learners are in fact learning the language (condition 63) because they are utilising all the knowledge and skills to ensure that their message is passed across successfully and there is no communication breakdown. Thus, the participants seized the opportunities to use English at many occasions and accomplish tasks as they saw this as the way to make them more conversant and simultaneously learn the language.All in all, participants felt that they experienced success when they were able to seize the opportunities to use and practise English as 'practice makes perfect'.

In terms of feelings, or termed as affective (Scovel, 2001), it is one of the areas that has an impact on learners' language learning besides cognitive and metacognitive. Its importance in the field of language learning is immortalised as one of the five hypotheses by Krashen (1982) – The Affective Filter Hypothesis. Affective filter refers to a barrier that filtrates the knowledge or input that is gathered. When one feels good, the filter is down and thus one is able to take in more effective learning and vice versa – when the filter is up, one might be able to take in learning but borrowing the expression from Stevick (as cited in Krashen (1982)), it might not 'strike deep'. In other words, having a low or weak affective filter in language learning ensures that the input is not only absorbed but also retained. Krashen (1982) specified three affective variables that are connected to being successful; self-confidence is one of them. Hence, mapping it to the findings of the study, when participants reported having their confidence boosted and associating English to positive notions, their affective filter was low and their absorption and engagement levels were high. This has evoked the feeling of success which can be an impetus for further learning.

On the other hand, the slow progress is due to problems in English which might stem from the difference between English and their mother-tongue. Spolsky (1989) lists two conditions that are related to progress. Conditions 35 and 36 on shared feature and contrastive feature, address the issues of facilitating and interfering language learning, respectively. "When a feature is shared by two languages, learning is facilitated" - Condition 35 (Spolsky 1989, p.21) and therefore, when there are differences in the two languages, there is interference in learning (Condition 36). Looking at Arabic and English, there are very marked differences, for example in writing. The most obvious is that there is no concept of capitalisation in Arabic, and as evinced by the data extract, at least one Arab participant has not grasp the concept.

Concluding remarks

The research question aimed at delineating the successes and challenges experienced by the participants in relation to the English language learning. The data gathered were categorised into three themes – opportunities, feelings and progress. Each theme was treated like a coin where there are two sides to it. This is partly related to the hyrid-language

learning environment in Malaysia where Malay is the main language and English is the second language. Although English is the second language, the participants experienced more successes than challenges in their English language learning in Malaysia.

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