Creating a Socially Constructed Environment to Facilitate Interactional Competence among Tertiary Level Students

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ABSTRACT

Acquiring interactional competence by adults with limited to intermediate English language proficiency is the area of interest in this study. This study sets out to examine the process involved in the development of achieving interactional competence in a socially constructed environment in a formal classroom setting, otherwise known as informal language acquisition. The data in this study were divided into two categories namely spoken, written and analysed by employing the qualitative research design. The analysis for the data was based on a checklist and a scoring rubric that were both developed based on the test specifications of the speaking component in MUET, features of interactional modifications by previous research and 5 stages typical in English language acquisition. Findings from the spoken data revealed that by being in a socially constructed environment, interactional competence is able to be achieved by individuals with limited to intermediate English language proficiency by not being too constrained with perfect grammar rules and the ability to use the target language in real-life with true human to human interactions. Findings from the written data substantiated the findings of the spoken data, showing that by achieving interactional competence in spoken English, competence in written English is not impossible to be achieved.

KEYWORDS: Interactional Competence, EFL, Socially Constructed Environment, Speaking Skill.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of acquiring a foreign language for children and adults alike has been of interest to many researchers for many centuries [18]. There have been countless debates regarding the successful rate of a child and an adult in terms of their second, and/or foreign language acquisition but as long as an adult stays healthy, the rate of success is just as good as or even might possibly be better than of a child [33]. In spite of all the work conducted on the second and/or foreign language acquisition of adults, there is still a gap in knowledge on the best approach to enhance an adult's acquisition of interactional competence in their second, and/or foreign language in a language classroom [4, 39].

Such environment is chosen to be illuminated in this study because for any adult, the second language to be acquired must be of use to them in their daily personal and professional lives [34]. On that account, being in a classroom environment with little or no exposure to the real usage of the target language may be a hindrance to the success in the acquisition process [16]. As such, to be able to naturally use the language, it has to be used in a language community [31], and more importantly, to have meaningful interactions with participants of the speaking community [7].

Since English is spoken widely by a large number of Malaysians [28, 14, 29], it is clear that the English language has become and remains the second most important language in Malaysia [1], the first being the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. The use of English in a large number of everyday events has accelerated greatly among many Malaysians [23] and this has certainly established Malaysia as an English speaking community [11, 5]. Although many Malaysians of today are able to interact in the English language, alarmingly, university undergraduates and graduates remain to be only modest users of English [13] and many other Malaysians have very limited ability to function in the language [25]. Therefore, classifying English almost as a foreign language in this country is more appropriate.

The purpose of this study is to show the developments and essentially, the success of a classroom of English as Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) among young adult students with limited English language proficiency (henceforth LEP). The study focuses on acquiring interactional competence through a socially constructed environment in a formal classroom setting. The research question to address the study is:

1. What are the developments in the process of acquiring interactional competence by young adult students in a socially constructed environment?

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LITERATURE REVIEW

There are two terms used in this study and these two terms will be defined in the following subsections.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

It is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by EFL as used in this study as it is concerned with the acquisition of interactional competence among EFL speakers of English. In order to achieve interactional competence, the group of students chosen as the participants of this study had to have meaningful interactions with the English discourse community in which they were socialising in. This particular discourse community includes their fellow EFL peers.

This group of students is considered as EFL speakers because an EFL speaker is a person who is learning English in a non-English-speaking country where English is not the official language, and English is not crucial in his/her everyday activities and interactions [37]. This group of students participating in this study is students who are learning English as a partial fulfilment for their undergraduate education.

Interactional Competence

The term 'interactional competence' is used by [47] to explain the interpretation of a conversational exchange that presupposes the culture and the tradition of a particular discourse community. Interactional Competence is a theory that looks at communication deeper than just the surface. It looks into the non-verbal semiotic resources, identity resources, linguistic competence resources, interactional resources, the register of the conversation, discursive practices, mutually and reciprocally employed resources, as well as viewing the interaction in a wider social and historical context. These are the aspects that should be also taken into consideration during the interpretation process of a conversational exchange mainly because in a conversation, the participants involved are more than just two speakers: it involves everyone in the background and everyone from the same background, and this is termed as the 'discourse community'.

In Interactional Competence, it is not a sin to make mistakes, for learning is useless if not practiced. Where knowledge is concerned, making mistakes could lead to a greater development of skills [9] because in any discourse community, the participants must be able to interact effectively and must learn to co-construct meanings with one another during a dialogue or a conversation. As such, in second language acquisition, if the focus is solely on utterances that are accurate, appropriate and fluent, this will result in the second language learners having a 'compensating' foreign language education as opposed to a truly 'emancipating' one [17].

METHODOLOGY

This section describes the research method used in the present case study. It provides the rationale for choosing case study as the research methodology, describes the participants for the study, outlines the methods of building the corpus and gives a description of the research instruments created to evaluate and analyse the spoken speech data and the textual speech data.

Adoption of the Case Study Methodology

A case study is a type of research methodology commonly used in the social sciences. This type of research allows an in-depth understanding of an event, phenomenon or situations in a real-life context [44]. It is usually adopted for studies that are more of explanatory, exploratory and descriptive [40] in nature because it answers the "why" and "how" questions, something that is not as easily justified by other types of research methodology [41]. As such, given the nature of this study, case study is deemed as the most appropriate method because it allows direct observations and data collection in natural settings [45]. The methods in a case study are not limited to only surveys, but also include ethnographies, experiments, quasi-experiments, economic and statistical modeling [46]. Furthermore, the case study method is the best method for a study that is attempting to address an explanatory question and an in-depth understanding of a particularly unique and individualistic situation, which is relevant and appropriate to this present study [38].

The Participants

15 participants from various backgrounds, but are in the same English course with the common intention to improve their writing skills. However, they will be subconsciously steered to improve their interactional skills. Initially, they were unaware of the direction of the study, however, once they were informed that they would be improving their interactional skills in an informal manner, they became highly excited and motivated to be part of this study. Apart from that, another reason that they were enthusiastic about participating in this study was that they were all really close friends because they have known each other for more than a year and a half prior to the study. Consequently, because of the close relationship between the subjects, it was completely natural for

the participants to be involved in the study. This view is supported by [43] who wrote, "… there can be no better research site for the observation of free conversations than the circle of one's own friends and associates".

A diagnostic test of the participants' oral abilities was administered in the third day of the second week and the results revealed that their English proficiency level was quite limited, hence, the term 'LEP'. In addition to the test, an informal interview was conducted after the test to better understand the participants' English language background and it could be deduced that they were very intimated by the language because throughout the years of learning, their mistakes were often magnified and their errors in their utterances were greatly exposed. Consequently, they would resort to using first language, Bahasa Malaysia, in their everyday lives as well as in their English language classes.

In order to ensure research ethics, several steps were adhered to and these steps are: i) asking for permission, ii) keeping the data safe, and iii) using pseudonyms. The participants were informed that they would be the subjects of this study during the second meeting in the first week. The researcher informed them that everything would be confidential and would only be used for the purpose of this study. They were also informed that their real names would not be revealed; pseudonyms would be used instead.

Building the Corpus

In choosing the set of spontaneous conversation [36] for the present work, three requirements were considered. First, this study dealt with spontaneous conversations and therefore it was important to maintain an informal method of learning environment. Second, this study required a large amount of speech data to assure validity in analysis, hence it was essential to include more than a single corpus, as well as to measure the achievement and progress of the subject. Third, because of the availability of large amount of speech data, it was crucial to keep the speech data within the scope of allocated time resources.

Considerations of the first requirement led to the choice of doing the observations in a readily accessible commonplace; a classroom. The reason classrooms were chosen to be the place of observations was because the study was conducted in a higher institution of learning and the participants enrolled in a language course. Although the setting is rather formal, the environment created by the researcher who was directly involved in the study was a very informal and social one. Apart from that, these classrooms had working air-conditioners amid the hot weather, and were located near food stalls, therefore making these classrooms the ideal locations for natural conversations to take place. In order to maintain the informal method of language acquisition, there were no notes or reference books given to the participants. The second requirement of data collection resulted in having two types of speech data; i.e. spoken and textual. The criterion for selecting the third requirement was the decision to limit the duration of the meetings as well as the number of textual speech data chosen to be included.

The spoken speech data were collected in 14 weeks for this is the typical duration of a semester in higher institutions of learning. Every meeting was limited to two hours per meeting hence, and the meetings were done twice a week. However, given the constraints mentioned, only 2 meetings will be chosen to be discussed and analysed. These meetings are: i) the eighth meeting in the fourth week and v) the twenty seventh meeting in the fourteenth week. The textual speech data were collected in 14 weeks as well but the hours were more than two because this was collected through the messages sent by the students through the WhatsApp Messenger application on their smartphones. These messages were collected in three different phases: i) Phase 1 include 30 lines of messages in the first week, ii) Phase 2 include 30 lines of messages in the fifth week, and iii) Phase 3 include 30 lines of messages in the fourteenth week. Given the constraint of time, only 5 lines each phase will be discussed and analysed.

Research Instrument

Three instruments were utilised to carry out this study. The first instrument consists of a sample of the MUET speaking proficiency test which was used as a pre-test to determine the level of these participants' English proficiency. The MUET question paper was chosen as the instrument for the pre-test mainly because in Malaysia, MUET is a test taken by secondary school leavers, matriculation, diploma and pre-university students to determine the level of their English language proficiency in order to pursue their studies in universities in Malaysia [20]. Since this study involves participants of the generic English speaking community in Malaysia, the level of the participants' English proficiency is defined according to the MUET band scores. The scores are classified into 'Bands' and the descriptions for these bands are:

Table 1: Description of MUET band scores

Band	User	Communicative Ability	Comprehension	Task Performance
6	Highly proficient user	Very fluent; highly appropriate use of language; hardly any grammatical error	Very good understanding of language and context	Very high ability to function in the language
5	Proficient user	Fluent; appropriate use of language; few grammatical errors	Good understanding of language and context	High ability to function in the language
4	Satisfactory user	Generally fluent; generally appropriate use of language; some grammatical errors	Satisfactory understanding of language and context	Satisfactory ability to function in the language
3	Modest user	Fairly fluent; fairly appropriate use of language; many grammatical errors	Fair understanding of language and context	Fair ability to function in the language
2	Limited user	Not fluent; inappropriate use of language; very frequent grammatical errors	Limited understanding of language and context	Limited ability to function in the language
1	Very limited user	Very limited user	Very limited understanding of language and context	Very limited ability to function in the language

The second instrument for this present study is a spontaneous conversation rubrics and checklist developed by [32]. The scoring rubrics was developed by combining [27], in [10] Interactional Modifications Involved in the Negotiation of Meaning and MUET's [21] Speaking Component Test Specifications. This instrument was used to analyse the spoken speech data collected during the pre-test, interviews as well as observations.

Table 2: Interactional modifications involved in the negotiation of meaning [27]

Interactional Feature	Definition
Clarification requests	Any expression that elicits clarification of the preceding utterance.
Confirmation checks	Any expression immediately following the previous speaker's utterance intended to confirm that the utterance was understood or heard correctly.
Comprehension checks	Any expression designed to establish whether the speaker's on preceding utterance has been understood by the addressee.
Self-repetitions:	
1) Repairing	The speaker repeats/paraphrases some part of her own utterance in order to help the addressee overcome a communication problem.
2) Preventive	The speaker repeats/paraphrases some part of her own utterance in order to prevent the addressee experiencing a communication problem.
3) Reacting	The speaker repeats/paraphrases some part of one of her previous utterances to help establish or develop the topic of conversation.
Other repetitions:	
1) Repairing	The speaker repeats/paraphrases some part of the other speaker's utterance in order to help overcome a communication problem.
2) Reacting	The speaker repeats/paraphrases some part of the other speaker's utterance in order to help establish or develop the topic of conversation

The third instrument for this present study is a textual speech rubrics and checklist. This is used to analyse the textual speech data collected from the messages written and sent by the participants through the WhatsApp Messenger application on their smartphones. In order to evaluate and develop the rubrics for this type of writing, [8] 'Categories for Evaluating Writing' was used as a guideline. The categories are: 1) Content, 2) Organisation, 3) Discourse, 4) Syntax, 5) Vocabulary and 6) Mechanics. However, the categories proposed by [8] have been typically applied to classroom writing tasks. The textual speech data for this present study differ from the conventional written materials in terms of the structure of the writing.

Traditionally, a written text does not allow room for errors, however, that is not the concern in this present study. This study allows the participants to make errors in their writings the same way they would in their spontaneous spoken speech. These errors were not analysed negatively, as these errors were used to determine the participants' interactional competence progress in their textual speech. Considering the textual speech are in short sentences, therefore, only three out of the six categories were selected: 1) Content, 2) Grammar; and 3) Vocabulary. The evaluation checklist and rubrics were adopted from the checklist and rubrics to analyse the participants' interactional WhatsApp Messenger messages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the findings and analyses the progress of the participants in acquiring interactional competence in English. The elements in the process of acquisition that will be discussed are: 1) Bahasa Malaysia Words and Phrases in Spoken Malaysian English, and 2) Ungrammatical Utterances in Spoken Malaysian English.

Bahasa Malaysia Words and Phrases in Spoken Speech Malaysian English

This section discusses the functions of Bahasa Malaysia (Malaysian language, hereinafter referred to as BM) words and phrases in the participants' spoken speech Malaysian English. The excerpts presented in this section comprise of spontaneous English interactions by the participants and the researcher. However, although the excerpts are in English, the structure of the conversations is not of the Standard British English (S.Br.E) or American English (Am. E). The English structure in the presented excerpts is from one of the many varieties of World English, and that is the Malaysian English (ME). Studies have identified three levels of the ME, i.e. acrolect, mesolect and basilect. The acrolect level is used in formal occasions and the structure is the the most similar to the Standard English (BrE and AmE), while basilect is the level used by the low-economy society and the structure differs greatly from BrE and AmE. Mesolect, on the other hand, is an in-between level between the two [6].

Regardless of the varieties, a typical ME speaker in a natural and relaxed setting will consciously or unconsciously use BM words and phrases in their sentences; and the most famous one of all is lah. Apart from the notorious lah, speakers of ME also tend to code-switch and code-mix when conversing in English, especially so in conversations that are spontaneous [2, 12, 15].

Functions and Developments of Bahasa Malaysia Words and Phrases

Given that both the participants and the researcher are Malaysians, BM is a language used and understood by all. Therefore, naturally, the participants included some BM words and phrases into their spoken English speech. The frequency of occurrences of these words and phrases was grouped together and the results are presented in Figure 1.
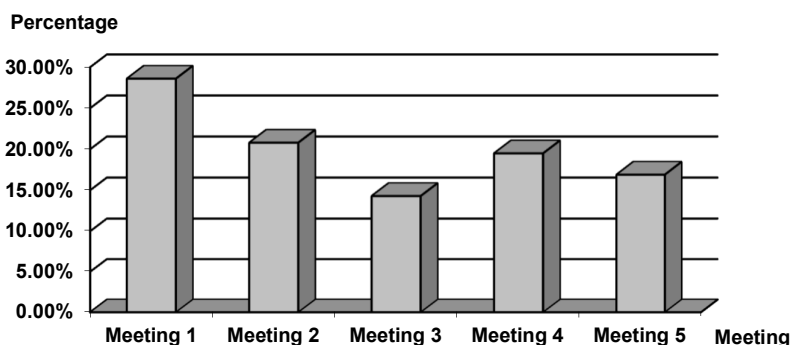

Figure 1: Frequency count of the participants use of BM words and phrases

Figure 1 charts the frequency count of the participants' use of BM words and phrases in their spoken speech Malaysian English. It can be seen from the graph that the usage of their BM words and phrases is generally decreasing; a positive sign of their interactional English improving. It is also clear from the graph that the highest number of BM words and phrases used is in Meeting 1 (28.6%) and there are two reasons for this result.

The first reason for this is because the participants had a high level of anxiety, given the fact that it was the first meeting, and were therefore unable to perform well. The second reason for this result is due to the fact that conversing in English in their daily lives is not something that the participants were used to. As such, they had only a small repertoire of the English vocabulary and had to use BM words and phrases to continue in the conversation. Although Meeting 2 and Meeting 3 show a decrease in the number of BM words and phrases used by the participants (a decrease of 7.8% for Meeting 2, and a decrease of 14.3% in Meeting 3), there is a slight increase in the number of BM words and phrases in Meeting 4 (from 14.3% to 19.5%). However, there is a decrease in the number of BM words and phrases used in Meeting 5, having used the lowest number of BM words and phrases as compared to all the other four meetings (16.9%, a decrease of 11.7% from Meeting 1). Overall, the increase in Meeting 4 did not affect their positive progress in acquiring interactional competence.

Excerpt 1:   **Meeting 3**
[Participants discussing driving without a license.]

Participant 1	:	But..they have to really really like.. some of them does∧ it illegally. So it's like, nasib la.. If you get -
Participant 2	:	(nods enthusiastically) Ha! Depends on nasib.
Researcher	:	Ah.. (nods enthusiastically)
Participant 2	:	Yes, if no police then..you safe la. But.. (shrugs) if got police, maybe you not safe.
Researcher	:	Safe?
Participant 3	:	Yes! (nods enthusiastically) From saman! From..jail!

In Excerpt 1, Participant 1 is of the Band 4 MUET level while Participants 2 and 3 are of the Band 2 level. Participant 2's and Participant 3's use of BM words are responses to Participant 1's use of the BM word. It can be seen that the participants' use of BM words and phrases is to code-mixing and code-switching in social interactions. This is a display of code-mixing and code-switching by Malaysian English speakers. Regardless of her proficiency level, Participant 1 also used BM words and phrases in her spoken conversational English. From this excerpt, it can be shown that the participants are more comfortable and confident to interact in Malaysian English with their peers. They are able to carry on in the conversation and can become more functional in the language, even with code-mixing. They are able to employ their identity resources and relate to their discursive practices with code-mixing. It can therefore be suggested that for adults such as the participants (LEP), code-mixing may not pose a negative attribute in acquiring interactional competence [3].

Excerpt 2:   Meeting 5
[Participants discussing hair care products.]

Participant 1	:	Skin only?
Participant 2	:	Skin and complete lah. Skin.. (uses hands to indicate words) for uh.. your hair.. and then -
Researcher	:	What do..does it do with our hair?
Participant 3	:	Huh? (looks at Participant 2)
Participant 1	:	Healthy shiny hair lah?
Participant 2	:	(nods enthusiastically) Kuatkanrambut. (nods enthusiastically) Takbagigugur.
Participant 4	:	Oh.. (nods attentively) Like using minyak..minyak.. olive oil!

Excerpt 2 is taken from Meeting 5. In this excerpt, Participant 1 is of the Band 5 MUET level, Participant 2 is of the Band 3 level, while Participants 3 and 4 are of the Band 2 level. From Excerpt 2, it can be seen, yet again, that using BM words and phrases in social conversations is evident. This goes to show that code-mixing and code-switching in a country as multilingual as Malaysia is a very common practice [12, 19, 15]; regardless of the speaker's English variety (acrolect, mesolect or basilect). Although code-mixing may be a bit of a problem if dealt with a person with no knowledge of Bahasa Malaysia, in the case of the study, it is a sign of the participants' progress in acquiring communicative competence. This is largely because by code-mixing and code-switching, a person tends to feel more familiar to the person code-mixing and code-switching as well [30, 24, 26]. In the case of this study, once the participants started feeling more familiar with each other and the researcher, it was noticed that they started becoming progressively more confident in their spoken English.

Ungrammatical Utterances in Spoken Textual Malaysian English
This section will discuss the functions of the ungrammatical utterances in the participants' spoken textual Malaysian English. Unlike written speech, in a spontaneous spoken textual speech, such as interacting through the WhatsApp Messenger application, there is not much time for beforehand preparation thus imperfections in word choice as well as grammar will highly likely be present [35]. Hence, for a country where English is learnt as a second language and a number of English varieties are present, it is not a surprise that Malaysian English speakers generally make ungrammatical utterances in their social spontaneous textual conversations [20].

The Effects of Grammar and Vocabulary on the Content of the Texts

Excerpt 3
[Participants discussing buying a secondhand book.]

Participant 1	:	Madam, is this the book you said in class just now?
Researcher	:	Yessza
Participant 2	:	Alrightyy.. I buy from senior only Rm 10!
Participant 3	:	Ha ha. This is way how the save budgets.
Participant 4	:	I smile a little bit and wink my eyes madam!

Admittedly, the participants' grammar was far from perfect, even in their spoken speech English, they made a lot of grammatical errors [22]. However, not being grammatically perfect does not entirely hinder the understanding of a sentence. The interaction in Excerpt 3 was able to be carried out by all participants and the researcher.

Excerpt 4
[Participants discussing cancelling the class to attend a programme.]

Participant 1	:	Madam. The program for tomorrow who with new lecturer must go.
Researcher	:	Ehhhh?
Participant 2	:	Our senior said it is compulsary to go.
Participant 3	:	Yes madam. But our lecturer said if madam say ok, then we alls can go.
Researcher	:	Ok. I give my ok.

The participants are starting to become more adventurous in their choice of words as the weeks went by. Although there was a spelling error ("compulsary"), the word that was chosen is a low-frequency word. This then clearly indicates that the participants are trying their best to express their words more effectively. By not putting such confined restrictions on the participants' spelling and choices of vocabulary, the participants were becoming more interested to interact in English. The researcher also believed that by doing so, the participants would progressively start gaining more confidence in their writings as they did with their spoken speech Malaysian English.

Excerpt 5
[Participants discussing finding an empty classroom for extra revision.]

Participant 1	:	Madam, apparently, the class have a people use.
Participant 2	:	They replace the class also. But I ask, they say after 10 minutes they finish.
Participant 3	:	Yes madam. We wait for the class to finish ok? Because the class is comfortable and spacious. Have aircond and fan.
Participant 4	:	Hold on. I will search upstairs.
Researcher	:	Ok. I will wait for your updates.

The researcher did not face any difficulty in understanding the full content of Excerpt 5. In addition to using "compulsary", the participants were able to use other low-frequency words such as "apparently" and "spacious" correctly. In the earlier meetings, the participants opted to use more BM words and phrases as well as short and choppy sentences. As their interactions in English became more frequent, they were able to function in more well-developed sentences and less BM words and phrases.

The main reason behind this positive development in the participants' spoken textual English lies in their confidence in being able to use the language more in real life. The meetings with the researcher provided the participants with a stronger and much more solid fundamental of the English language; in terms of vocabulary, grammar and even the flow of their thoughts. Such strong and solid fundamental resulted in the participants gaining more confidence in using English in their spoken speech and their textual speech. Judging by the progress and developments in both spoken and textual speeches, it can be concluded that the participants have been successful in acquiring interactional competence in their target language.

Another interesting finding was that, once the participants gained some self-confidence, albeit having grammatical errors and code-switching, they worked very hard to improve their spoken and written English language skills. They showed tremendous effort to succeed and this is the characteristic of people with high self-motivation [48]. Surprisingly, although the learning environment was rather informal, the participants were very much interested to ask the researcher even outside of the meetings on matters related to spoken English language, e.g. translation of words and phrases from Bahasa Malaysia to English, acquisition of new vocabulary and correcting their own pronunciations. As such, in this study, self-motivation is another contributing factor to the participants great progress in acquiring interactional competency.

Consequently, it can be concluded that there are three most prominent factors contributing to the participants' progress, and these are:
a)   self-confidence,
b)   being able to use the target language in real-life and practice true human interaction, and
c)   self-motivation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This present study has given an account of the process of LEP young adults acquiring interactional competence in Malaysian English. This study has also explained the possible reasons for the said adults' developments in their acquisition process. It is a highly data-driven study in examining and analysing the LEP adults' spoken speech and spoken textual competence in spontaneous and informal Malaysian English. Hence, the approach of this study differs from other studies in SLA for it allows room for errors and analyse these errors in a positive manner, enabling the LEP adults the opportunity to experience true human-to-human, real life language.

The results of this study has confirmed that by being able to use and interact in the language without having their errors (grammatical and pronunciation) scrutinised, LEP adults [42] are able to perform well and be successful in acquiring interactive competence and become functional members of the generic English society in which they socialise in. This study highlights the potential usefulness of providing an appropriate social learning environment in order to facilitate interactional competence among tertiary level students.

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