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Malaysian TESL Students and Students of TBFL

EXPLORING THE LANGUAGE LEARNING MATERIALS USED OUT-OF-CLASS BY MALAYSIAN TESL STUDENTS AND STUDENTS OF TBFL

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Abstract

This study recognizes that disconnection between language learning experiences inside and outside of the classroom may create negative feelings for learners. It posits that while learner attitude and motivation contribute to language acquisition, it also impacts on out-of-class language learning behavior. This study is significant in that it focuses on the materials learners use outside the classroom to support their use and development of target language ability. The objectives of the study were to uncover similarities and differences in the out-of-class language learning materials used by Malaysian TESL students and Malaysian students of Bahasa Malaysia. Following on from this, suggestions for improving language acquisition, out-of-class or classroom based were explored. Fifty UPM TESL students and 50 students of TBFL completed an out-of-class language learning survey. SPSS software was applied to carry out the statistical procedures needed to collate and analyze the data. A range of implications for educators and those involved in development of teaching materials is discussed.

Keywords: Language learning experiences; language acquisition; language learning behavior; language learning materials

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INTRODUCTION

In both learning a new language and using a new tool, the learning process changes how learners perceive the world and how they relate to their social and cultural environment. According to Brown (2000), culture can play an enormous role in shaping each person's distinct behavior. He suggests that social factors play an important role, emphasizing that the learning of a new language and skill is undeniably a social activity within the socio-cultural environment of the learners themselves. The level of success and engagement in using a new language and skill largely depends on the 'need' each presents in the social interactions of individuals or even as means to cope and respond to the immediate demands of society.

This study aims at finding out about the Out-of-Class Language Learning (OCLL) materials used by Malaysian undergraduates in different teacher training programmes: the TESL (Teaching of English as a Second Language) and TBFL (Teaching of Bahasa Malaysia as a First Language). Data from this research would be useful to course developers who might want to know how to incorporate some aspects of OCLL materials so that learners may become more comfortable with them in in-class environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For brevity and convenience, this review of research development concerning language acquisition will commence in 1990. At this time Finnemdimn (1990:467) asserted that when learners are not open to learning a second or foreign language, it may be caused by their anxiety or their unwillingness to accept authentic input around them. Hence, the variety of attitudes each and every learner brings to the process of learning may in turn affect their learning process. There has been much research concerning affective aspects of language learning and the processes that facilitate it.

Since it is not easy to separate the contribution of classroom based learning towards language acquisition from that of out-of-class language learning, the majority of language researchers have focused on formal teaching and learning inside the classroom which is more perceivable and controlled. However, within the current decade, there are certain researchers who have been focusing on out-of-class language learning strategies. One of the most notable pioneers in this regard is Benson (2001) who has defined Out-of-Class Language Learning (OCLL) as any kind of learning which is happening anywhere else except inside the classroom and involves self-instruction, naturalistic learning and self-directed learning (p. 62). According to him, when focusing on where the learning is happening, we should consider both the

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behavior of the learners and simultaneously the event where that learning takes place.

In a formal classroom setting, many language classrooms have linguistic or grammatical competence as the goal of instruction. To gain knowledge beyond the structure of a language in other competencies important to language acquisition, a learner would likely benefit from exposure to appropriate contexts outside of the classroom. If a learner is only using English inside of the classroom, for example, they are unlikely to gain communicative competence in the second language.

When in the out-of-class environment, the ESL or EFL learner can also learn about another component of communicative competence, which is the learner's ability to participate appropriately in "speech events." A speech event could be an apology, a job interview, a phone conversation, or a doctor's visit (Mitchell & Miles, 1999). Speech events and appropriate language and behavior for speech events are not taught in the classroom as frequently as grammar and vocabulary (Ohta, 2000). It is the out-of-class language situations where learners most often have the opportunity to practice and learn the true cultural norms for specific speech events. These aspects of communicative competence are difficult to teach in a classroom. To teach students how to participate in various speech events would involve teaching many different components including politeness strategies for each event, appropriate phrases to use and acceptable behavior for each specific event. Due to the content involved, many teachers do not have the time or knowledge required to teach this. It can also be difficult for teachers to base lessons on speech events because the classroom often does not provide meaningful contexts where speech events can be practiced. It is the communicative experiences that a learner has available outside of the classroom that have the potential to best develop their communicative competence.

Norton and Toohey (2001) did a study of a good language learner – an adult immigrant, Eva. They found that the success of this learner was due to access to a variety of English conversations in the learner's community and access into an Anglophone social network. For example, Eva worked at a fast food restaurant where she had one of the lowest level jobs (cleaning bathrooms) that required no interaction with customers and which was a position usually held by immigrant employees who had low English skills. The restaurant sponsored monthly outings for all of their employees, attended by both native English-speaking employees and employees who had low English skills. At these outings, Eva was able to build her Anglophone social network, learn more English, and then in turn use more English at the workplace and get more desirable duties. Though formal language learning played a part, the language

success of Eva, the adult learner in Norton and Toohey's study, was due largely to an out-of-classroom context, the monthly employee outings.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

What do our students do to learn English on their own outside the classroom? How do they learn English of their own volition? Undoubtedly, what students do (on their own), beyond the classroom is as revealing as an explanation of their language performance. If students really do nothing on their own outside class, it is, of course, hard to expect a generally high standard of English among students in Malaysia. What facilitates or inhibits our students' out-of-class English learning activities? It will be interesting and important for language teachers to know what actually happens beyond the classroom. One cannot naively assume that all learners know the importance of exposure or practice outside the classroom or how to capitalize on available resources. A better understanding of their own work on improving English will inform our teaching strategies. Out-of-class learning should be part and parcel of the whole learning issue as it can supplement in-class learning and enhance one's learning effectiveness.

Analysis of in-class and out-of-class language learning has highlighted the importance of aligning university goals with real world goals. The more closely aligned these are, the easier it will be to promote the development of learner independence, and to provide opportunities for learners to apply their new skills and knowledge in real world settings. This is because learners are more highly motivated by learning tasks which resemble those they face in the real world.

This research was therefore undertaken in order to better understand Malaysian students' language learning behavior beyond the classroom walls. Furthermore, the research sought to address the dearth of such investigations based on the Malaysian context, and specifically investigate the differences between out-of-class language learning of Malaysian TESL students and TBFL students.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It was thought that an appreciation of the factors informing the decisions that shaped the out-of-class language learning behavior of Malaysian students would contribute to a broader understanding of differences in the development of individual second language skills, and the different levels of fluency and overall proficiency learners achieve. The insights offered through an increased understanding of out-of-class language learning, aid the implementation of learner autonomy as a goal, and contribute to the effectiveness of guidance given to learners by teachers.

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It is hypothesized that the results obtained from this study will shed light on some methodological aspects as well as learning techniques, each of which is to be implemented by both the teachers and language learners in order to facilitate the process of language learning. Additionally, curriculum designers may benefit from the findings of the study in that they can make use of some techniques and recommend some complementary extra-curricular learning materials to be used as supplements for English language learning.

OBJECTIVES

This Study is Set

   (1) to determine whether there are any similarities or differences in the materials used for out of class language learning by Malaysian TESL and TBFL students;

   (2) to explore ways in which language acquisition and out-of-class language learning might be enhanced for both groups of students.

   (3) to determine whether there are any similarities or differences in the usefulness of the materials used for developing language skills for TESL and TBFL students.

Research Questions

The research questions for the present study were based on concepts found in earlier, similar studies. With this in mind, our study has attempted to answer the following questions:

   (1) What types of out-of-class language learning materials are used by Malaysian TESL students?

   (2) What types of out-of-class language learning materials are used by Malaysian TBFL students?

   (3) How useful are out-of-class materials for developing language skills for TESL and TBFL students?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The present study has been conducted on Malaysian undergraduate TESL students and TBFL students. Due to geographical distances among universities which offer this field of study, a two-step cluster sampling method was used to select samples. Based on this cluster sampling procedure, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) was first selected and then the overall number

of Malaysian undergraduate TESL students and TBFL students was obtained from the Education Department. The overall number of students was 460. Following the recommendation of the sample table developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1978), 50 samples were randomly selected for TESL students and 50 for TBFL students respectively.

Instruments

The data was gathered using a questionnaire titled "The Out-of-class Language Learning Survey", conducted by Nigel Pearson (2003) and piloted thereafter (see Appendix II). According to him, the survey design was influenced by questionnaires published in previous research. Questions are about the perceived usefulness of materials and activities for learning out-of-class, and what helped the students choose materials and activities.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were distributed to 50 undergraduate Malay students in their seventh semester studying at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Subjects were TESL students and TBFL students enrolled in the Educational Studies Faculty. The subjects comprised learners of various proficiency levels in English and of various ethnicities. The OCLL Survey was administered in one thirty-minute session since the pilot study had shown that the students were able to answer the questionnaire in such a time frame. The OCLL Survey was fully administered to the students but only the parts related to the objectives of the present study were investigated further. Non-related parts were not deleted in order not to affect the reliability and validity of instruments. The collected data were exposed to SPSS version 15 to infer results.

RESULTS:

Data collected was analyzed and the results are presented as follows:

1. What types of language learning materials are used by Malaysian TESL students out-of-class?

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TABLE1
Frequency distribution of the Out-of-Class Language Learning
Survey for TESL students

Magazines	48 (96%)
Music	44 (88%)
Newspapers	43 (86%)
Reading Books	36 (72%)
Television News	35 (70%)
Internet	34 (68%)
Videotape/DVDs	31 (62%)
Radio News	30 (60%)
Dictionaries	25 (50%)
Grammar Books	24 (48%)
Computer Programmes	24 (48%)
Vocabulary Exercises	15 (30%)
Audio Tapes/cassettes	14 (28%)
Pronunciation	11 (22%)
CD ROMs	9 (18%)
Dictation Exercises	7 (14%)
Punctuation Exercises	4 (8%)
Other	0

As shown in Table 1, a wide range of materials were used by the Malaysian TESL students for OCLL. However, over 70% of respondents reported using reading books, newspaper, music and magazines. The most popular materials they had used out of class during their process of language learning were magazines (96%) and music (88%). In contrast to this, pronunciation exercises (22%) proved to be the least desired type of materials by UPM TESL students.

2. What types of language learning materials are used out-of-class by TBFL students?

TABLE 2
Frequency distribution of the Out-of-Class Language
Learning Survey for TBFL students

Internet	41 (82%)
Dictionaries	41 (82%)
Newspapers	39 (78%)
Music	38 (76%)
Reading Books	35 (70%)
Magazines	35 (70%)
Television News	31 (62%)
Vocabulary Exercises	29 (58%)
Computer Programmes	26 (52%)
Grammar Books	25 (50%)
Radio News	25 (50%)
Pronunciation	24 (48%)
CD ROMs	19 (38%)
Audio Tapes/cassettes	18 (36%)
Videotape/DVDs	17 (34%)
Punctuation Exercises	10 (20%)
Dictation Exercises	7 (14%)
Other	0

As shown in Table 2, a wide range of materials were used by the TBFL students for OCLL. Like the TESL students, a large number of the TBFL respondents reported using reading books, newspaper, music and magazines. Considering the materials used out of class during their process of language learning, the TBFL respondents chose the internet and dictionaries (82%), newspapers (78%) and music (76%) more frequently than other types. The TBFL respondents rated punctuation exercises (20%) and dictation exercises (14%) as least desirable, in the same way that UPM TESL students did. It is interesting to note that more TBFL students made use of dictionaries compared with the UPM TESL students, and similarly that there are differences in the use of videotapes and the internet as a medium for OCLL.

3. How useful are out-of-class materials for developing language skills for TESL and TBFL students?

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TABLE 3
Mean and SD of the purpose of using out-of-class materials for TESL and TBFL students

Variables	Mean BM	SD	Mean TESL	SD
Speaking	3.98	.742	4.30	.735
Writing	4.02	.742	4.00	.989
Listening	4.02	.769	4.06	.866
Reading	4.22	.789	4.08	.751
English vocabulary	4.16	.841	4.12	.848
Grammar knowledge	3.92	.922	3.86	.880

The data for this analysis was drawn from subject responses to question 3 in the OCLL survey that asked respondents to rate the materials they used from 1 to 5 for their perceived usefulness for language skill development. It appears, since the mean scores are higher, that the TESL students find more value for developing speaking skills from their use of OCLL materials than the TBFL students. Similarly, it also appears that the TBFL students gain more from their use of OCLL materials for the development of reading skills than do the TESL students. The differences in the mean scores are not great, however, and when comparing the groups as a whole may not be statistically significant.

It is interesting to consider the differences in the standard deviation scores for the two groups. When the SD score is higher, it reflects less variation amongst the cohort and a stronger tendency towards the mean. While the data indicates that both groups of respondents found OCLL materials useful for developing writing skills (mean 4.0, 4.2), the higher standard deviation (.989) for TESL students suggests that there was more uniformity amongst their responses. Similarly, the TESL students had a high SD score for the usefulness of OCLL materials for development of listening skills. In contrast to this, the TBFL students' data concerning the usefulness of OCLL materials for the development of grammar knowledge indicates greater consistency within this cohort than within the TESL students.

CONCLUSION

It is somewhat heartening to find that learners do make independent use of a range of language learning materials outside of the classroom. This is generally considered to be to their advantage, although this study is limited in so far as it does not measure, for example, how often an individual uses materials such as videotapes. This study has sought neither to find out exactly how the learners use the materials to support language learning, nor the efficacy

and usefulness of it for the learner or the learning. The Internet, for example, could be equally useful in the development of vocabulary, grammar knowledge, reading and research skills as, say, writing skills.

Differences in the popularity for OCLL of some materials seem worthy of further investigation. It may be possible, for example to uncover aspects of chosen OCLL material that make it particularly motivating, helpful and relevant to learners, or difficult to use and understand. TBFL students, for example, may have difficulty finding their way around Internet pages written in English and structured in unfamiliar ways. The challenge remains to tease out and separate those variables in OCLL that more strongly relate to the learner and those which relate to the materials. The data gathered reminds us that groups of learners such as those studied here, are not homogeneous, and that individual differences and preferences influence learning behavior. While we do not know exactly what UPM TESL students view when using videotapes for OCLL, using that medium in English is more popular amongst them than it is for the TBFL students using videotapes to support OCLL in Bahasa Malaysia. It may be possible that the UPM TESL students employ the use of video to compensate for weaknesses in their listening skills, or that the quality and range of materials available is a factor that intervenes in OCLL.

The imperative for educators and academics is the development of learning materials and activities that will help learners make effective use of the range of OCLL materials available to them. These may also assist in the drive to re-align or bring closer together the disparate university and real world goals mentioned earlier. There is a need for resources that specifically support self-directed language learning and for a better understanding of the role of media and technology in independent learning. The promotion of independent OCLL, or learner autonomy can help ensure that learners make the best use of their study time. It suggests learners take more responsibility for conscious decisions affecting the development of their language competency. It is important to actively model good language learning behavior and to advise learners about making wise choices and decisions that develop both receptive and productive skills while maximizing language acquisition.

Greater learner independence and the promotion of learner autonomy have much to offer all learners, not just those learning English. It is hoped that studies such as this one will help change the perception of those who view the learning of English negatively. The opportunities are rich for constructive discussion and development of materials and methodology that more closely meet learner needs, achieving educational goals while respecting the values and expectations of Malaysian society.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

For Current Students

1. Do you feel that there is an increasing emphasis on the English language over the past few years? What do you think is the reason for this?
2. Do you think there has been a decreasing emphasis on Mandarin in the past few years? What do you think is the reason for this?
3. Do you think the changes in the Chinese language syllabus in the recent years play a part in causing the level of Chinese language in Singapore to drop? Why?
4. Do you feel you can articulate your ideas better in Chinese or English? Why do you think so?
5. In comparison to the English language, what do you think is the general attitude Singapore students have towards learning Chinese language? Describe in three sentences.
6. If given a choice, would you prefer the traditional way of learning Chinese (writing Chinese characters[   ] for every chapter, having the weekly dictation [   ] and memorizing text) or the current method which is to communicate more and write less? Why?
7. Which method do you think will aid you better in learning Chinese?
8. If you can, would you drop Mandarin? Why?
9. If Singapore decides to change the bilingual policy to a monolingual policy, would you be supportive of it? Why?

For Ex-RGS/HCI Students

1. How were English and Mandarin lessons taught in the olden days?
2. Based on your understanding and communications ability, do you feel that English or Chinese was a stronger subject for you? What makes you say so?
3. The Chinese language syllabus has been made considerably easier and students' eligibility to take higher Chinese has been increased in the past few years. What is your view on the new implementations of this language policy?

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4. Do you think the traditional ways of teaching Chinese language is more effective in mastering a language? Why?
5. What was your attitude towards language learning?
6. Do you think that could have played a part in your language proficiency now? Why?

For School Teachers

1. The government made English the working language in Singapore while Chinese, as one of the mother tongues, a second language. In the recent years, Chinese language syllabuses have been made much easier compared to about a decade ago. Do you think this government policy has anything to do with the shift in language use in Singapore? Why?
2. Do you feel that the policy brought a positive or negative change to the students' education in language learning overall? What makes you think so?

APPENDIX B

Survey Questionnaire

About First Language (English)

1) Is English the language that you first learnt as a child?

☐ Yes

☐ No

2) How many percent of your time per day do you use English besides during school hours?

☐ All the time (76-100%)

☐ Often (51-75%)

☐ Occasionally (26-50%)

☐ Rarely (0-25%)

3) Who do you use your first language with? You may tick more than one.

☐ Parents

☐ Siblings/Cousins

☐ Classmates/Friends

☐ Grandparents

☐ Others:

_____

4) How many percent of your time do you make use of the 3 skills listed below 4 outside curriculum time every day?

-Reading (i.e. books/newspapers/magazines):

☐ All the time (76-100%)

☐ Often (51-75%)

☐ Occasionally (26-50%)

☐ Rarely (0-25%)

-Writing (i.e. emails/letters/faxes/MSN/SMS):

☐ All the time (76-100%)

☐ Often (51-75%)

☐ Occasionally (26-50%)

☐ Rarely (0-25%)

-Conversing (i.e. phone calls):

☐ All the time (76-100%)

☐ Often (51-75%)

☐ Occasionally (26-50%)

☐ Rarely (0-25%)

5) Do you think your first language (English) is stronger than your second language (Mandarin)?

_____

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6) Is your English grade better than that of your second language (Mandarin) grade?

_____

7) What is your first language (English) overall score last year?

_____

About Second Language (Mandarin)

1) When did you start learning your second language?

_____

2) Where and how did you start learning your second language?

_____

3) How many percent of your time do you use second language besides during Mandarin lessons within curriculum times?

☐ All the time (76-100%)

☐ Often (51-75%)

☐ Occasionally (26-50%)

☐ Rarely (0-25%)

4) What is your second language (Mandarin) overall score last year?

_____

5) How often do you make use of the 3 skills listed below outside curriculum time every day?

-Reading (i.e. books/newspapers/magazines):

☐ All the time (76-100%)

☐ Often (51-75%)

☐ Occasionally (26-50%)

☐ Rarely (0-25%)

-Writing (i.e. emails/letters/faxes/MSN/SMS):

☐ All the time (76-100%)

☐ Often (51-75%)

☐ Occasionally (26-50%)

☐ Rarely (0-25%)

-Conversing (i.e. phone calls):

☐ All the time (76-100%)

☐ Often (51-75%)

☐ Occasionally (26-50%)

☐ Rarely (0-25%)

6) State 3 ways of learning Mandarin which you think might benefit you?

   _____

   _____

   _____

7) Will you continue to learn Mandarin even if it is no longer compulsory? Why?

   _____

8) Do you think learning and mastering Mandarin is important? Why?

   _____

About Language Spoken at Home

1) What is/are the language(s) used in your family? Please state in the order of most commonly used to least commonly used.

   _____

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2) Do your parents place higher emphasis on English or Mandarin?

_____

3) Are you more interested in English or Mandarin? Why?

_____