

ENGLISH LANGUAGE USE AMONG EFL LEARNERS IN SUNWAY UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

JULIANA OTHMAN^a
University of Malaya

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an investigation into patterns of English language use among English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners at Sunway University College, Malaysia. A sample of 47 respondents participated in this survey. Data collection was carried out through questionnaires. The results indicate that the respondents use English in both their social and academic domains. The findings also reveal that the EFL learners in this private institution are more inclined towards instrumental goals—passing examinations and future career developments—in their learning of English. The implications of this research are discussed.

Key words: EFL learners, language use, training preferences.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) today takes place in a wide variety of contexts: in private and public institutions, with learners coming from different language backgrounds. Every EFL classroom is influenced by various contextual factors. These include the role of English in the society, linguistic and cultural attitudes toward EFL, the educational institution itself and the students' background.

In Malaysia, English is used to access the vast amount of information currently available in English and also to contribute to this knowledge base. As far as government policy is concerned, English is viewed as vital for the nation's growth. Although it may not be the medium of instruction in public universities, accessing key information in a great variety of fields is often dependent on having reading ability in English. McKay (2002) points out that the widespread use of English in a variety of political and intellectual areas makes it imperative for any country wishing to access the global community for economic development to have access to it.

Educational institutions in Malaysia have always focused on promoting the quality of English language programmes for their respective students to enhance their ability to communicate fluently in English. A better understanding of language learners can have a beneficial effect on the process of attempting to help them in learning English as a foreign language. Examining learners' patterns of language use, attitudes and training preferences will enable us to cater for their needs and to foster proficiency in the EFL class.

Studies on Language Use

In recent years, language teaching has become more and more learner-centred. Learners' needs and interests were taken into consideration in designing a course. Bearing in mind the influence of different social and cultural factors on how language learners learn, an analysis of their language use and preferences will make teachers more aware of their needs and will help teachers design a more effective and efficient language course.

There are a number of studies which involved gathering data on learners' views on their patterns of language use, their perception of their English language ability and their ranking of training preferences for language skills. Smith's (1983) study looked at the attitudes of Asian students towards English in order to find out about their needs and feelings. Over 825 participants from 12 universities and colleges took part in the survey. The researcher found that the reasons for studying English and the skills desired are instrumental in nature.

Hyland (1997) conducted a study to examine students' perceptions of English in academic success. The results showed that Hong Kong students appeared to recognize the importance of English competences for their academic success and that they acknowledged the value of English for Academic Purposes classes. In addition, the students reported that they faced difficulties in writing and speaking English.

In the Malaysian context, Tan (1994) investigated the use of English in selected domains among undergraduates at a local university. Her study attempted to establish the patterns of English language use by the good and the weak students. Her findings showed that in the education domain, students used less English most of the time and only for reading purposes. In entertainment and mass media domains, more English was used. Tan's study also indicated that young Malaysian students perceived English to be important for the fulfillment of their personal and academic needs. Thus English appeared to serve utilitarian needs for individuals who were about to embark upon careers or to engage in academic pursuits.

A study by Che Lah and Kaur (2003) aimed at documenting English language use among undergraduates at another public university and also at documenting their ranking of English language use pertaining to the four language skills, viz listening, speaking, reading and writing. The researchers reported that the students generally had a positive attitude towards English and believed that the mastery of the four skills would benefit them instrumentally in their academic pursuits and future career developments.

In line with the views of the authors mentioned here, this study aims to contribute to the literature in the field by investigating the use of English among language learners in a private institution where the medium of instruction is English.

Context of the Study

The English Language Unit at Sunway University College offers an Intensive English Programme (IEP) designed to equip students with the language skills needed to enroll in other academic programmes at the university. The IEP consists of four levels: Level I (Beginner), Level II (Elementary), Level III (Pre-Intermediate) and Level IV (Intermediate). All four levels emphasize the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—which are introduced through component teaching (oral and written) and a variety

of activities. Upon passing Level IV of English language proficiency during this period, students will be able to enroll in other academic programmes.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to examine the patterns of English language use among IEP students, their perception of their language abilities and training preferences at Sunway University College Language Unit. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- a) What is the frequency of English language use in the EFL learners' daily and academic activities?
- b) How do the learners perceive their English language ability in the four language skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing?
- c) Which aspect of language proficiency do the learners rank as top priority in terms of their training preferences?

The findings of this study would be of value for instructors to understand their learners' needs and training preferences so that they can design English courses that can more effectively meet the requirements of their students.

METHODOLOGY

The respondents in the present study were 47 EFL learners who were taking various levels of the IEP course. The ages of the participants ranged from 17 to 27 years. The students came from different language backgrounds and cultures, i.e. Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Arabic and Indonesian.

The Questionnaire

A questionnaire which consisted of various statements on learners' views of their English language needs was administered. Using a 4-point Likert scale (1="never" to 4="very often"), the respondents were asked how frequently they used English in their daily and academic activities. In addition, they had to rate their language proficiency in various categories using a 4-point Likert scale (1="poor" to 4="excellent"). Learners were also asked to rank the language skills in order of their training preference.

The data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed in terms of frequency distribution, means and rank order. The means are simply the average of the responses with 1="never or poor," 2="sometimes or adequate," 3="quite often or good" and 4="very often or excellent." The standard deviation is a sort of average of distance of each response from the mean. Results on each item in the questionnaire are presented in tabular form.

RESULTS

English Language Usage

In this section of the questionnaire, the learners had to respond to 13 statements about the frequency of English language use in their daily and college activities. These questions were broadly divided according to the four commonly accepted language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Table 1. Learners' Use of English in Daily Activities

Activity	Mean*	Std. Dev.	Never (%)	Some- times (%)	Quite Often (%)	Very Often (%)
Watching TV/videos/films	2.53	0.72	0	59.6	27.7	12.8
Listening to radio broadcast	2.06	0.94	27.7	51.1	8.5	12.8
Communicating with relatives	1.87	0.95	42.6	36.2	12.8	8.5
Socializing with friends	2.79	0.75	2.1	34.0	46.8	17.0
Reading newspapers/magazines	2.26	0.77	12.8	55.3	25.5	6.4
Reading stories/novels	2.23	1.00	27.7	34.0	25.5	12.8
Searching Web sites for information	2.60	1.01	17.0	27.7	34.0	21.3
Writing letters/faxes	1.72	0.65	38.3	51.1	10.6	0
Writing e-mails	2.40	0.83	10.6	48.9	29.8	10.6

*Value based on 4-point scale: 1="never," 2="sometimes," 3="quite often," 4="very often."

From Table 1, it is clear that writing letters and communicating with family members in English are the least frequent activities carried out by the respondents. This could be attributed to the fact that the language used in the respondents' home is their respective mother tongue, i.e. Chinese, Bahasa Indonesia, Korean, etc.

In contrast, the most frequent activity where learners engaged in English is when they socialized with their friends ($M = 2.79$). Surfing the internet for information seems to be another frequent activity for many learners ($M = 2.60$). The third most frequent daily activity in which the learners used English is when they watched television, videos or films ($M = 2.53$).

Table 2 presents information on how often the learners used English in their college activities. From the table, it can be seen that the most frequent college activities that the

learners participated in are reading ($M = 2.87$) and listening to lectures ($M = 2.77$). This finding is consistent with the fact that reading academic texts in English is part of the academic requirements at the university. The same applies to listening to lectures in English as the learners are studying in a private institution where the medium of instruction is English. The least frequent college activities carried out in English by the learners are writing assignments and taking part in class discussions. This result seems to suggest that more writing and speaking activities should be conducted for the learners so that they can get more practice in these areas.

Table 2. English Language Use for College Activities

Activity	Mean*	Std. Dev.	Never (%)	Some-times (%)	Quite Often (%)	Very Often (%)
Listening to lectures, discussions or seminars	2.77	0.83	4.3	36.2	38.3	21.3
Writing assignments	2.45	0.77	10.6	40.4	42.6	6.4
Reading	2.87	0.77	0	36.2	40.4	23.4
Taking part in class discussion	2.49	0.78	6.4	48.9	34.0	10.6

*Value based on 4-point scale: 1="never," 2="sometimes," 3="quite often," 4="very often."

Perceptions of English Language Ability

Next, the learners' perception of their English language proficiency for everyday communication was examined. Table 3 displays their responses. On average the learners rated their listening skills as good ($M = 2.57$). This is followed by their speaking skills ($M = 2.51$) reading ($M = 2.36$), and writing ($M = 2.21$). As a whole, the majority of the learners rated their proficiency as adequate for the four skills in everyday communication.

Table 3. Learners' Perception of Their English Language Proficiency for Everyday Communication

Skill	Mean*	Std. Dev.	Poor (%)	Adequate (%)	Good (%)	Excellent (%)
Reading	2.36	0.61	4.3	57.4	36.2	2.1
Writing	2.21	0.90	23.4	40.4	27.7	8.5
Listening	2.57	0.83	8.5	38.3	40.4	12.8
Speaking	2.51	0.80	6.4	48.9	31.9	12.8

*Value based on 4-point scale: 1="poor," 2="adequate," 3="good," 4="excellent."

Responses with respect to the learners' perception of their English proficiency for academic purposes are shown in Table 4. The results are comparable with the responses in Table 3. Reading skills received the highest mean rating ($M = 2.42$), followed by speaking

skills ($M = 2.34$), listening skills ($M = 2.31$), and writing skills ($M = 2.19$). The majority of the learners perceived their English proficiency for academic purposes as adequate in the four skills.

Table 4. Learners' Perception of Their English Proficiency for Academic Purposes

Skill	Mean*	Std. Dev.	Poor (%)	Adequate (%)	Good (%)	Excellent (%)
Reading	2.42	0.71	6.4	51.1	36.2	6.4
Writing	2.19	0.85	19.1	51.1	21.3	8.5
Listening	2.31	0.75	8.5	59.6	23.4	8.5
Speaking	2.34	0.76	10.6	51.1	31.9	6.4

*Value based on 4-point scale: 1="poor," 2="adequate," 3="good," 4="excellent."

Training Preferences

To obtain a clear idea of learners' priorities in terms of the skills to be acquired, they were asked to rank their training preferences. The results show that 40.5% of the learners chose speaking skills as their first priority; 34.0% of the learners ranked writing as the most important skill they would like to acquire; 14.9% ranked listening skills, and 10.6% ranked reading skills as their top priority. As a whole, the results suggest that these students perceived productive skills, i.e. speaking skills and writing skills, as very important to be acquired for their academic purposes.

Learners were asked about their future academic fields of study after they have completed their IEP study. Table 5 indicates that a large majority of the learners (70.2%) would enrol in business or accounting programs. Second is computing or information technology with 23.4 % of the learners, while 12.8 % chose arts/humanities, 8.5 % chose sciences, and merely 4.3% chose engineering course.

Table 5. Future Academic Fields of Study

Field of study	%
Arts/Humanities	12.8
Business/Accounting	70.2
Sciences	8.5
Engineering	4.3
Computing/Information Tech.	23.4

The learners were also asked about their preferred learning style. Table 6 shows that 68.1% of the learners stated that they preferred working in groups while 23% chose independent learning. Only 6.4% of the learners indicated they preferred the use of pictures and visual aids.

Table 6. Preferred Learning Style

Learning Style	%
Independent learning	23.4
Group work	68.1
Use of pictures/visuals	6.4
Others	2.1

CONCLUSION

This study is exploratory in nature and due to the small number (47) of respondents in the survey, it is difficult to make strong recommendations for changes in how teaching and learning of English as a foreign language should be carried out. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn.

This study found that the learners' patterns of English language use were in accord with findings from previous studies by Tan (1994) and Che Lah and Kaur (2003). For daily activities, English was often used to socialize with friends and for entertainment purposes like watching television and movies. For academic activities, a large percentage of the respondents used English to read academic texts. Since the respondents of this study were studying in a private institution where the medium of instruction is English, it is natural that their second-most frequent academic activity was listening to lectures in English.

Data from the survey also indicated that when learners were asked to rate their English language proficiency for everyday communication and academic purposes, they ranked writing as their least competent skill. As for their training preference, learners ranked speaking and writing skills high on their list. These results seem to confirm that the learners regarded speaking and writing as the most important skills for them to improve on. This preference for the ability to speak and write in English is not surprising since learners perceived the ability to communicate in both modes of discourse as the most tangible evidence of their mastery of the language. Given the information gathered from the survey, a strong implication for this study is that speaking and writing skills should be given the highest priority in the curriculum. Doing so would provide the learners with the skills they need to pursue their academic studies. Finally, as a majority of the learners who took part in the survey intend to embark on business-related and IT studies, the syllabuses and materials used in the program could have business- and IT-related themes. Learners come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse needs and goals. In making decisions with regard to the type of activities that should be conducted in a language classroom, teachers should take into account learners' diversities. Contextualizing language within the learners' domain of study could make the language-learning experience more relevant and meaningful, thereby increasing the learners' motivation to learn.

REFERENCES

- Che Lah, S., and Kaur, S. (2003). English language use among undergraduates in University Science Malaysia: A survey. *ACELT Journal*, 7(1), 42–62.

- Hyland, K. (1997). Is EAP necessary? A survey of Hong Kong undergraduates. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 7, 77–99.
- McKay, S. L. (2002). *Teaching English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, L. E. (1983). *Readings in English as an International Language*. London: Pergamon Press.
- Tan, R. (1994). The use of English in selected domains amongst first year students of the Faculty of Arts and Social sciences in the University of Malaya. *Unpublished M.A. thesis. Universiti Malaya, Malaysia*.