

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Motivation in second language learning (SLL) is important in predicting successful learning. According to Dornyei (2001) motivated learners can perform in the second language (L2) regardless of their language aptitude or other cognitive characteristics. There are many factors related to motivation among learners that affect their performance

in the target language (TL) such as attitude towards the community of the TL or the language itself, the learning environment, be it in the classroom or outside the classroom or the use of and exposure to the TL. Many studies have shown that failure and success of learning are due to motivational factors.

1.1 MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

The emotional side of human behavior in second language learning (SLL) is important. Understanding human feelings and how people respond to things or believe in something have become an increasingly important aspect of SLL (Brown, 2000). By understanding how learners respond and believe in something, teachers will be able to identify ways to positively motivate a learner's interest in learning a language. Motivation has been identified as one of the factors which best explains the success and failure of learning a language. Many studies in human learning have shown that motivation is the key to learning (Dornyei, 2001). Motivation is usually defined as an internal state that stimulates, controls and maintains behaviour (Woolfolk, 2004). It explains "why learners decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity and how hard they are going to pursue it" (Dornyei, 2001:8). It also describes how learners work hard to score good grades, and how they participate actively in the learning process. Studies have shown that the proficiency level of a learner would strongly depend on his or her motivation to learn the target language (see Chapter 2). Therefore, it is undeniable that motivation has a significant effect on a learner's success or failure.

Levels of motivation are often influenced by many factors. Generally, the factors

are identified as external and internal factors. Both of these factors play significant roles in defining the nature of motivation and ways to enhance its effects on learners (McCombs & Pope, 1998). Based on these external and internal factors, researchers have postulated theories and frameworks to explain the role of motivation in language learning. These theories and frameworks will be discussed in 2.1 of Chapter 2.

Researchers in SLL have applied these theories and frameworks to determine the influential factors for learners' high, low or neutral performance in the target language, and to identify the causes for the positive and negative effects on the learners' performance in language learning. Hussein (1979) found that the socioeconomic background of learners plays a significant effect on learners' performance in the TL. Jamali's study (1992) showed that high exposure to English influenced learners' performance in the language. Phillips (1998) stated that learners' perception of their English Language teacher affects their performance in the English Language. These are a few of the examples of studies done on motivational factors that influence learners' performance in the English Language.

All of these studies show that motivation plays an important role in learners' performance in the TL which is, in this case, the English Language. The motivational factors will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

1.2 THE BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.2.1 The Development and Role of English Language in Malaysia

The use and importance of English has undergone many phases since teaching of the

language was first introduced in the early-nineteenth century by the British Government. Historically, when the British expanded its empire to South East Asia, including Malaysia, they also introduced the English Language to the region. The expansion of commerce and trade in this region influenced the need to use English among the people. English had become the lingua franca for the traders, replacing the Malay Language once used widely in commerce and trading before the coming of the British Empire to the region. During the colonization period in Malaysia, there was also an increase in educational facilities where schools were formed to improve the education of the people. English medium schools like convents and high schools were introduced and books were imported from England. These spread the use of English and generally improved education in Malaysia. The use of English also increased with the role of the mass media. Back then, people were exposed to the English Language through national radio stations, television networks, newspapers and movies. They learned the language through listening to conversations on the radio, television networks and movies. This also helped to spread the use of English among the people.

As the country moved towards independence, the learning of English was made compulsory in all primary and secondary schools. This was due to its value in commerce, higher education and international affairs (Abdullah, 1994). After the country gained independence, the importance of learning English became more subjective, but in many contexts it had become part of the everyday life of Malaysian society. Its status as the official second language has made the learning of English important as it enables students to use English for specific activities. Learning English also enables students to

improve their skills and increase their knowledge of English for specific needs at higher levels of education (Abdullah, 1994). Now, in accordance with its status as the second national language, the scope of English Language taught focuses more on the structures and functions required in a second language situation, while the context is now more Malaysian (Asiah, 1994). Even though English is no longer the medium of instruction in schools, it was retained as one of the core subjects in schools and is used at all levels of instruction (Asiah, 1994). With the initiation of globalization and rapid development in Information and Communications Technology (ICT), English has become more important and has become the medium of instruction in science, engineering and medical courses in some universities and colleges. The language is widely used in various domains such as business, education and employment. It has become the second most important language in Malaysia (Asmah, 1992).

Nowadays, English has become a common medium of communication and is used as a communicative tool in various domains. For example, in businesses and organizations, English is regarded as an important tool to precipitate business expansion, image building and its use is perhaps a matter of survival in today's globalization. With today's business competition from foreign companies, local companies have to be on par with their counterparts. They have to be proficient in promotions, advertisements and marketing plans in order to be considered edgy and professional (Mohd Faisal, 2002).

English also plays an important role in employment prospects in Malaysia. People with good proficiency in the language can expect to get employment more easily and quickly than those who are not. This was mentioned by Dato' Mustapa Mohamed (2005)

in his keynote speech during the conference on *Progress and Challenges in Human Development in Malaysia: Ideas for the 9th Malaysia Plan*: “Poor command of the English Language has been often quoted as a barrier for graduates to land a job, particularly in multi-national companies”. No doubt proficiency in English has been set as a standard requirement for many jobs. Additionally, it is also important for career advancement. A person with a good command in English has a brighter future in his or her career.

The development of English in the Malaysian education domain is also important. The government has continuously increased the awareness of the importance of mastering the English Language. They see the role of English in enabling Malaysians to be competitive at the international level. The teaching of Mathematics and Science subjects in English is one of the campaigns that the government has implemented in primary schools. It is hoped that with this early exposure to the language, students will be able to keep up with developments in Information Communication Technology (ICT), to access the Internet and also to read articles and research papers and other materials published in English when they proceed to the secondary and tertiary levels. Apart from primary schools, English is also used widely in universities. Lectures are conducted in English and students are encouraged to write their assignments in English. According to Mohd Faisal (2002), English is related to academic success. It is said that successful graduates are those who have mastery of the English Language. This is because they need to read and analyze reference books which are mostly in English, and the more they read the better their understanding and writing skills. In turn, this results in better performance

in their academic activities.

The important role of the English Language can be seen in every aspect of the life of a Malaysian. It has emerged as an important mode of communication in Malaysia and is used alongside the national language, the Malay Language (Mohd Faisal, 2002). If before its expansion was due to commerce and trading, now, it is due to its significance impact in the development and growth of certain major areas in Malaysia such as in tourism, law, politics, and the media and translation domains. In accordance with its major roles in various areas, it is important for learners to perform positively in the English Language in order for them to be easily employable and be competitive at the international level. Typically, successful graduates are those with a high level of mastery in the English Language. Therefore, graduates who have a better understanding and better writing skills in the English Language can expect better achievement in their academic efforts.

Put simply, even though the Malay Language retains its status as the national medium of communication for Malaysians, English is recognized and accepted as an important medium of communication in Malaysia. It plays a significant role in many domains, especially in employment and business. Lack of proficiency and fluency in English will only impede one's opportunity to move forward in his or her career.

1.2.2 The Setting

In this study, several factors relating to motivation were investigated among

undergraduates who had completed Level 2 of their English Language proficiency course in Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The English Language proficiency course is offered at Pusat Penataran Ilmu dan Bahasa (PPIB) which was established in 1994. The course is compulsory for all UMS students who obtain grades 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 in the English paper in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), bands 1, 2 and 3 in MUET, grades 6, 7, 8 and 9 in English 1119, and grades C, D, E and F in English papers at the Diploma level. The course is divided into four levels. The levels are English for Oral Communication (Level 1), English for Reading and Writing (Level 2), English for Occupational Purposes (Level 3) and English for Academic Purposes (Level 4). Levels 1 and 2 provide a foundation for learners to apply later when they take Levels 3 and 4 of the English course, while Levels 3 and 4 focus more on the application of the English Language in specific discourses. Students take the courses during the first and second year of their study and the grades they obtain counts towards their Grade Point Average (GPA) every semester. Students need to pass every level in order for them to graduate.

1.3 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Even though the English courses offered in UMS focus on the four skills in learning a language, i.e. speaking, writing, reading and listening skills and the modules for each level are designed to target the learners' ability in the language, some students still cannot use or speak the language at a satisfactory level. They do not demonstrate fluency in the language. Their failure to progress in English can be seen in their achievement in the English Language examination. Every semester, there will be students from every level of the English Language proficiency course who have to re-sit the paper. It has also

been observed that these repeaters show poor performance and poor participation in class. They seldom take part in class activities, are often absent from class and do not bother to do the class assessments. Also, only a small number of students get Distinction and Credit in the English Language examination (see Table 3.9). Most of the students get a Pass in the examination. This means that the marks they obtain for the English Language examination is in the low range of 35 to 59 (see Table 3.9).

Despite learning the English Language since Primary 1 until tertiary level, these students do not achieve good results in the English Language examination. The English Unit in PPIB, UMS has made several attempts to help these students by organizing programs such as English Language Enhancement and English Language activities but there are still failures. As a result of these failures and the small number of students who get Distinctions and Credits in the English Language examination, the researcher is interested in investigating the underlying factors contributing to these matters.

1.4 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study is to investigate the relationship between the socio-economic background of the students, their exposure to and use of English, their attitude towards the English Language, their perceptions of their English Language instructors and the students' grades in the English Language examination. It also intends to demonstrate which of the aforementioned factors, namely the socio-economic background of the respondents, their use of English and exposure to the language, their attitude towards the language and their perception of their English Language instructors, contribute most

noticeably towards the failure to succeed in using English.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- i) Does a student's socio-economic background influence his or her academic achievement in the English Language examination?
- ii) Does a student's use of English and exposure to the language influence his or her academic achievement in the English Language examination?
- iii) Does a student's attitude towards English influence his or her academic achievement in the English Language examination?
- iv) Does a student's perception of the English instructors influence his or her academic achievement in the English Language examination?

1.6 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is based on Dornyei's framework of second language motivation (2001) which focuses on motivation from the classroom perspective. The framework conceptualizes second language (L2) motivation into three levels. The three levels are:

- i. the language level that represents the traditionally established components of L2 motivation associated with integration and instrumentality, such as culture and community as well as language use and exposure;
- ii. the learner level which involves individual characteristics students bring to the learning process, such as self-confidence and attitude; and
- iii. the learning situation level that is associated with situation-specific motives rooted in various aspects of L2 learning within a classroom setting such as the

syllabus, the teaching materials, the teaching methods, teachers' personality, behavior, and teaching style.

Based on this framework, the study investigated four motivational factors, namely socio-economic factors (total household income, parents' highest education, family background etc.), respondents' use of English and exposure to the language, their attitude towards English and their perception of their English Language instructors to determine if these factors influence the respondents' grades in the English Language examination. The socio-economic background of the respondents and their use of English and exposure to English correspond to Dornyei's language level, while the students' attitude towards English corresponds to Dornyei's learner level. The students' perception of their English Language instructors corresponds to Dornyei's learner level and learning situations level.

The limitation of this study is that it only focuses on one specific group, that is, 100 first year students who had already completed their Level 2 (English for Reading and Writing) course at UMS. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to other groups.

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Many studies on the relationship between motivational factors and achievement in the target language have been conducted in various settings (refer to 2.2). The findings of

these studies are varied. Based on the increasing and frequent number of failures in the English Language course in UMS, the researcher is interested in investigating whether or not the findings of other studies in other settings are relevant to UMS. It is hoped that this study will help the instructors of the English Language proficiency course in UMS to understand the investigated factors contributing to failures in the English Language examination and to provide necessary solutions to the dilemma. Although a factor such as the socio-economic background of the respondents cannot be controlled by the instructors, other factors, namely the respondents' use of English and exposure to the language, their attitude towards the English Language and their perception of their English Language instructors, can be manipulated to improve the respondents' performance in the English Language examination.

1.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the background of the study, namely the development and role of English Language in Malaysia that have become increasingly important for better employment, career advancement and business opportunities for Malaysians. It also discusses the significance of the study which the researcher believes will help the instructors of the English Language proficiency course in UMS to understand better the factors contributing to failures in the English Language examination. To investigate these factors, the researcher adopts Dornyei's framework of second language motivation (2001) which analyzes motivational factors from the classroom perspective. The factors investigated in this study are the respondents' socio-economic background, their use of English and exposure to the language, their attitude towards English and also their

perception of their English Language instructors. It is hoped that this study will be able to provide necessary solutions to the increasing and frequent numbers of failures in the English Language course in UMS. The following chapter (Chapter 2) will review the related literature for this study.

CHAPTER 2