Chapter 1-Introduction

1.1. Introduction

In recent years, researchers in the area of language learning and teaching have become increasingly interested in the various demographic, cognitive and affective variables that make up an individual learner's contribution to the process of language learning. Among the variables thought to influence language learning are age, ethnicity, learning style and personality; and motivation, beliefs and perceptions. Of these variables, beliefs are one of the few that are susceptible to manipulation by teachers, considering that many individual learner differences appear to be more stable constructs, for example, personality, learning style and intelligence. By understanding how learners view the language learning process, a teacher can identify beliefs that contradict what is currently accepted by language educators and attempt to correct these beliefs. For example, Bernat (2004) found that more than half the Vietnamese migrants learning English in her study believed that '*You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly*'. This contradicts a commonly held view among language teachers that mistakes are an essential part of language learning. The significance of language learning beliefs is that they are said to influence the way a learner approaches the task of language learning (Horwitz, 1988; Ellis, 2008), which in turn has implications on the outcome (Horwitz, 1988). For example, a student who believes mistakes are detrimental to one's language proficiency may be less likely to participate in communicative classroom activities and may even be dissatisfied with a teacher who does not correct every mistake he makes. If teachers are aware of the misconceptions held by their learners, they can set out to correct them, for example, by explaining why these beliefs are misconceptions, or by conducting activities that demonstrate the flaws in these beliefs. On the other hand, other variables like personality and learning style are inherent to learners and are difficult to change, whether through the actions of teachers or those of learners themselves.

The term 'beliefs about language learning' is used to refer to a learner's preconceived ideas about the language learning process that can be formed by past experience, socio-cultural context (Horwitz, 1999; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2006a) and other factors like gender (Bernat & Lloyd, 2007) stage of learning and learning environment (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Horwitz, 1999). Horwitz, who is often credited with pioneering the systematic study of learner beliefs about language learning, studied these beliefs as stable cognitive constructs, utilising closed-choice Likert-type questionnaires, in a survey instrument called the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory, or BALLI (Horwitz, 1987, 1988). However, more recently, other researchers such as Barcelos (2000) have argued that language learning beliefs should not be studied in isolation from the socio-cultural context in which they were formed. Researchers who take a socio-cultural perspective on beliefs about language learning advocate the examination of these beliefs as socially-constructed contextualised in the class-room and experience-based (Barcelos 2000; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). These researchers believe that studies on learner beliefs should focus on learning more about how and why certain beliefs are constructed instead of simply measuring them as numbers on a scale.

While the term '*beliefs*' is often used in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research to refer to the notions a learner has about the language learning process, '*perceptions*' is generally used in reference to participants' views or feelings about a wide range of issues, including matters related to the language learning process. For example, while Horwitz uses the term 'beliefs' in the BALLI, she also uses the term 'perceptions', in another paper focusing on the role of beliefs and language learning anxiety (Horwitz, 1989). In this study, the term 'beliefs' is used to refer to learners' ideas about the language learning process, while the term 'perceptions' refers to learner's opinions about factors outside the classroom in their experience of learning English in Malaysia.

The study of learner beliefs and perceptions is in line with the shift of focus in language learning and teaching, moving away from generalized views of language learning and

towards deeper investigation of individual factors in language learning. In addition, examining language learning beliefs is the starting point in the process of encouraging learner autonomy, or self-directed learning, which should be the final goal of any good language course. Therefore, the value of studying learner beliefs and perceptions lies in the insight they give us on how learners view the learning process as well as how they view their present learning situation, with the goal of informing teaching practices and learner training activities.

Learner training, which is the explicit teaching of language learning strategies to improve their ability to learn a language, goes hand in hand with the encouragement of learner autonomy. After a language course has ended, it is often necessary for learners to continue developing their language skills, particularly in the context of learning English prior to enrolment in an English medium academic programme. Because of this, learner training has become a component of language courses which is gaining importance along with the usual components of language input and skills practice. Since beliefs are thought to affect language learning success through their influence on a learner's choice of learning strategies, beliefs and strategies have been studied together by researchers such as Yang (1999), who studied the language learning beliefs and strategy use of Taiwanese ESL learners, and Mokhtari (2007), who studied the language learning beliefs and language learning strategies of Americans learning Persian. On a related topic, Wenden (1998) states that metacognitive knowledge, or beliefs about language learning should be a component of learner training, in addition to teaching learners about effective language learning strategies. Knowing how learners view the language learning process is useful for both teachers and administrators. Language teachers can identify unrealistic, or misguided, beliefs which are affecting a learner's progress and strategy use while both teachers and administrators may be able to increase learner satisfaction with a course by adapting classroom activities and materials to meet, to a certain extent, learner expectations.

1.2. Background

English language learning and teaching is becoming an increasingly significant part of Malaysia's education industry, as it is in many other parts of the world. The Malaysian population is made up of three major ethnic communities, with more than three languages or dialects being spoken widely. Bahasa Malaysia is the official language of Malaysia. In addition, English, which was the language of the former British colonials, is spoken quite widely and is the language used in many offices and institutes of higher education, both public and private. The English spoken by Malaysians is commonly referred to as Malaysian English, and, even in its standard form, it has numerous differences from British or American English in terms of vocabulary use, structure and pronunciation. However, many Malaysians speak a colloquial or 'low' dialect of Malaysian English, that has been referred to as a patois or pidgin (Baskaran, 1994), and this variety is often hard for foreigners to understand due to its lexical, syntactical and phonological variations. Due to concerns about the standard of English among Malaysian students, various measures have been taken to improve English proficiency among locals at both the school and tertiary levels. Not only is Malaysia a multilingual country with its own host of language related complications, but the increasing number of international students coming to Malaysia poses another language-related situation that has become a matter of concern to educators and administrators in public and private institutes of higher learning. Most international students will enrol in English medium academic programmes and, in many cases, they may need to undergo language proficiency courses before being accepted into their intended academic programme. As beliefs about language learning are considered to influence a learner's approach, and possibly ultimate success, in language learning, these learners' assumptions about the language learning process could have implications on their success in learning English.

In addition, the fact that Malaysia is not considered a country where English is a native language means that these learners will be learning English in a situation that is far different from that of international students learning English in countries such as the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. It is also a slightly different situation from that of learners of English as a foreign language in their native countries, for example, Taiwanese learners of English in Taiwan or Turkish learners of English in Turkey. The context of foreign learners of English in Malaysia differs from that of learners of English in their home countries as they are learning English whilst simultaneously adapting to a new environment, both inside and outside the classroom. In addition, when compared to international students learning English in an English-speaking country, international students in Malaysia face the added challenge of learning English in an environment in which the variety of English they encounter outside the classroom may not be the same as the variety they are being taught in their language course.

1.2.1. World Englishes

Kachru (1985) proposed a model of English language use as being made up of three circles: namely, the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle, and the Expanding Circle. In Kachru's model, the Inner Circle comprises what is known as English-speaking countries: the U.K., the U.S., Canada, New Zealand and Australia, while the Outer Circle comprises countries in which English holds a special place in government and commerce, in other words, former British colonies such as Malaysia, Singapore, India and Kenya. Furthermore, Expanding Circle countries are defined as all other countries, in which languages other than English are used but in which English is steadily gaining importance as a link to international communication (Kachru, 1985).

A key difference between the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle countries is that the former have adopted the English language and made grammatical, lexical and phonological

variations leading to the creation of distinct local varieties of English (Kachru, 1985). The Expanding Circle, on the other hand, prefer to emulate the Inner Circle countries in terms of grammar, vocabulary and, more significantly, pronunciation. In Expanding Circle countries, such as Japan, Iran and China, accent training and teaching of colloquialisms are a popular part of English language teaching. In contrast, in Outer Circle countries acceptance of the local variety of English is gaining acceptance and people no longer look towards the Inner Circle countries as a model.

In the past, English language training in Expanding Countries was largely to prepare students for overseas education in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. These countries, and others such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia, were the traditional destinations for overseas education. However, in recent years, factors such as foreign exchange values, post-911 immigration regulations and improving standards in developing nations, have led students around the world to consider other destinations. Among the countries that have been receiving international students is Malaysia, which has seen an increase in international student enrolment. In terms of Kachru's Circles of English, this has brought about an interaction between the Outer and Expanding Circles.

Learners of English from countries such as Iran, China and Libya, who may have undergone English language training in their own countries, are now learning English in order to use it in an Outer Circle country. Often, they are taught by Outer Circle teachers. These students are then put in a situation where certain factors, such as accent, which were previously considered important, are no longer valued as much. In addition, they may be exposed to variants from standard British or American English in their interactions with locals. This unique situation may have brought about an interesting phenomenon that is significant in the learning and teaching of English, for example, changes in learner beliefs and conflicts in learner perceptions about their learning context, teachers and language use.

1.2.2. International Students Learning English in Malaysia

The international student group in Malaysia is a mixed group of students. In 2008, Chinese students made up the largest group of international students followed by Indonesian and Middle Eastern students ("Foreign students turn", 2009). However, recent reports have stated that Iranian students are now the largest student group ("New 120,000-foreign student target", 2010). According to statistics from the immigration department, at the end of 2008, there were at least 12 nations which had more than 500 students each in the country, while the overall student population came from 148 different countries. In the institution where this study was conducted, however, the majority of students were from Libya, followed by Sudan, Somalia and Iraq. Moreover, the faculty at this institute was equally diverse, with teachers from more than eight different countries, and many of these teachers were teaching African and the Middle Eastern learners for the first time. Based on the discussions held in teachers' meetings, the teachers have found that learner expectations of the language course and their beliefs about what language learning should involve are often at odds with teaching practices and classroom activities. For example, many Libyan students profess they prefer to learn grammar rules than engage in speaking practice and, against their teacher's advice, will often take two days' study leave to 'revise' for a simple progress test.

As an administrator and a teacher, I listen to the concerns of these learners on a daily basis and have found, contrary to my expectations, few learners talk to me about language points or skills development. Their worries usually concern how various aspects of their learning situation do not conform to their expectations of what language learning is, or should be. Some examples of learner comments I have heard include the following: "*I am too old for this.*" "*If I could talk to native-speakers every day, I would not be in the Beginner level.*" and "*If my teacher spoke my first language, learning would be easier.*"

From listening to students' concerns, it has become apparent that the success of a particular teaching technique or activity is influenced by learner opinions and beliefs. If learners'

expectations are not met or if they have negative perceptions of a particular method or teacher, they may not engage fully in the learning process. It then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby the learners' lack of engagement in the learning process leads to poor results. Learning a second language is an emotional process, particularly for international students, who are far from home and under pressure. Examining their beliefs and perceptions will allow instructors to better understand these learners and others like them and, hopefully, make changes to teaching practices that will help them face the challenges of language learning.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

It is generally accepted that a learner's view of the language learning process, of language use and of his own ability to learn a language can determine the steps a learner takes to learn the target language. In addition, as learners are the end-users or clients of language learning courses, the beliefs a learner has about the language learning process are important because they can also affect a learner's satisfaction with the course (Horwitz, 1989). When learners have realistic beliefs and positive perceptions about their language learning experience, they are more likely to make good progress in their attempts to learn a language. Likewise, unrealistic beliefs and negative perceptions can result in failure to learn a language well because they can lead learners to approach the task of language learning in ineffective ways.

As experience is among the factors thought to play a role in shaping beliefs and socio-cultural context (Barcelos, 2000; Ellis, 2008), teachers and administrators dealing with international students may not have an understanding of the experiences and socio-cultural background that these students bring into the classroom, in the form of their beliefs about language learning. Because of this, identifying learners' beliefs about the language learning process places teachers and administrators in a better position to provide instruction, not only on the target language, but also on how students should approach language learning.

As with other areas of SLA research, research into language learning beliefs has recently emphasised the socio-cultural approach towards examining the language learning beliefs held by different groups of learners. This approach highlights the need to understand language learning beliefs as grounded in the context of individual learners' current learning experience, past language learning experiences as well as individual, social and cultural factors. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the learning environment of each learner group when examining any aspect of their learning experience, for example, their language learning beliefs. The language learning experience of international students learning English in Malaysia involves not only their past learning experiences, but also their experiences and perceptions related to using the English language, both inside and outside the classroom. Since the development of language skills depends largely on practising the target language in authentic situations, factors outside the classroom may play an important role in these learners' overall learning experience. Thus, the perceptions held by international students about Malaysia as an English learning destination will have an impact upon their language learning beliefs as well as their overall performance and their satisfaction with their language learning course. In addition, because English proficiency has far reaching implications on an international student's academic and social life, the beliefs and perceptions held by these learners can determine whether a student has a positive or negative learning experience in Malaysia.

Existing studies on international students in Malaysia have already identified language issues as being a particularly significant concern to these students and their educators. For example, Hamzah, Moloudi, and Abdullah (2009) found that international postgraduate students at a local university were dissatisfied with their language course. Another study by Kaur (1999) found some dissatisfaction among international postgraduates at another university with regards to their English placement test. Social issues were also identified by another researcher, Pandian (2008), who reported that many international students wanted

more opportunities to interact with locals, while a few participants also reported discrimination from local students. Since language is a significant part of international students' learning experience, an examination of this group's beliefs and perceptions about learning English in Malaysia could provide useful insights that might lead to a better understanding of the challenges faced by these students. In addition, with more information about how these learners view language learning and their experience of learning English in Malaysia, language course providers would be better equipped to design language programme that cater to this specific group.

In conducting a literature search on international students learning English in Malaysia, it was found that there is a paucity of data, particularly on international students from Middle Eastern and African nations, which is an increasingly significant demographic to Malaysian higher education.. Since little is known about how these students view the process of language learning, or how they perceive their learning experience, there could be many social, cultural or educational differences that Malaysian English language teachers will have to become acquainted with. In addition, most of the recent studies on international English learners in Malaysia have centred on students who are already enrolled at university, yet there is a large number of international students undertaking English courses in various local language schools and colleges for the purpose of applying to Malaysian universities. Because these language schools and colleges serve as feeders to universities around the country, the successful teaching and learning of English in these programmes will have implications not only for those students and teachers in the language centres and colleges, but also for the educators and university administrators who will eventually be responsible for proving instruction to these international students.

The research context of this study serves to fill gap in existing research by providing data on the beliefs and perceptions of international students learning English in Malaysia, in addition to providing more data on the learning of English by Middle Eastern and African

students in this country. Since the participants were enrolled in an English programme at a local college with the aim of applying to Malaysian universities, this study will also provide insight into the learning experience of English language learners in this particular context.

1.4. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to identify the language learning beliefs held by international students learning English at a local college in addition to exploring their perceptions about learning English in Malaysia. The objectives of the study were to:

1) to investigate the language learning beliefs of international students learning English at a college in Kuala Lumpur,

2) to explore the participants' perceptions of learning English in Malaysia.

3) to identify whether there is a statistical relationship between the participants language learning beliefs and their perceptions of leaning English in Malaysia.

4) to explore the underlying factors that influence participants' perceptions of learning English in Malaysia.

Although the terms 'beliefs' and 'perceptions' are sometimes used interchangeably, for the purpose of this study, the term 'beliefs' will refer to the beliefs learners have about the language learning process in general. On the other hand, the term 'perceptions' will be used to refer to learners' opinions about their language learning experience, more specifically, about learning English in Malaysia and the learning and teaching activities at the institution. Data was collected using Elaine K. Horwitz's Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1987), a questionnaire about learners' perceptions of learning English in Malaysia (PELLEM) and a semi-structured interview in order to answer the research questions which are listed in the next section.

1.4.1. Research Questions

In order to fulfil the objectives of the study, four research questions were formulated. With these research questions, the focus of the research was narrowed to two variables, language learning beliefs and perceptions of learning English, in the context of international students learning English in Malaysia. The research questions are listed below.

1) What are the language learning beliefs of international students learning English at a local college in Kuala Lumpur?

2) What are their perceptions of learning English in Malaysia?

3) Is there a statistically significant relationship between their language learning beliefs and their perceptions about learning English in Malaysia? and

4) What are the other factors that influence the learners' perceptions of learning English in Malaysia?

The research questions above aim to guide the study in finding out more information about the beliefs and perceptions held by international students learning English in Malaysia. While a number of similar studies have been conducted in other contexts, the significance of this study lies in its context, which is that of international students learning English in Malaysia. The next section will describe the significance of this study.

1.5. Significance of the Study

The context of English as a second language (ESL) learning in Malaysia provides an interesting opportunity to look at learner beliefs and attitudes in a country where English holds a special position although it is not a native language to most. ESL studies in Malaysia have focused largely on Malaysian students; however, there is also a growing number of international students enrolled in ESL courses. These international students are an important learner group to the Malaysian Education Industry, which has experienced a large amount of growth in the past decade. The data collected from the study could be of direct benefit to the participants of the study as it will identify any beliefs that might have a

negative impact on their language learning and highlight specific problems the participants are facing as English learners in Malaysia. The teachers in the college would be able to address participants' misconceptions about language learning as well as suggest ways in which they could better develop their language skills outside the classroom. In addition, since most international students enrolled at the college in question are of the same nationalities as the participants, the teachers and administrators at this college would be able to use the findings to improve the Intensive English course that the participants were enrolled in. This study would also be invaluable to other language teachers and administrators dealing with this student group and the universities to which these students are applying. In addition, the study will also provide data that will have implications for the education industry in Malaysia. The next sub-section will give a brief overview of the internationalisation of the Malaysian Education Industry and the role of English in Malaysia's goal to develop this industry into an education hub for students from around the world.

1.5.1. The Education Industry in Malaysia

In March 2009, Malaysia surpassed its target of 80,000 international students, prompting the Higher Education ministry to set a higher target of 120,000 international students by 2015 ("New 120,000-foreign student target", 2010). According to the Minister of Higher Education, there were 75,000 international students enrolled in Malaysian colleges and universities in 2008, which was a forty percent increase from the previous year ("Foreign students turn", 2009). The Ministry has also announced the government's intention to develop the country into an education hub in the region. While the majority of international students in Malaysia come from Asian countries, an increasing number of students from the Middle East ("Foreign students turn", 2009) and Africa are enrolling in undergraduate, postgraduate and other tertiary level academic courses. According to Sirat (2008), the post-911 visa requirements in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom have

resulted in an opportunity for the Malaysian Education industry to grow. The country now sees a much higher influx of students from the Middle East and Africa, and, according to the most recent reports, students from Iran have now overtaken those from China and Indonesia as the largest population of international students ("New 120,000-foreign student target", 2010). Regardless of their country of origin, many of these students will need to take language courses to meet university language proficiency requirements.

However, there is a paucity of data about aspects of ESL learning by international students in Malaysia. In addition, there have been very few studies on the language learning beliefs and perceptions of this student group. As language proficiency has academic and social implications, understanding the beliefs and attitudes of the different groups of foreign ESL learners in Malaysia will enable educators to better meet their needs; thereby, facilitating their entry to academic programmes as well as their interactions with the local and expatriate communities.

The ultimate success of these international students in acquiring the level of proficiency necessary to cope with academic study in English and life in Malaysia has long-term implications. Firstly, from the monetary aspect, the tuition fees paid by international students make up a significant portion of the potential earnings of both public and private institutes. In addition, other industries, such as housing, automobile, entertainment and leisure, will also benefit from catering to this group of consumers, who will bring foreign exchange into the country. More importantly, the positive experiences and academic achievements of international students in Malaysian educational institutes will attract students from other nations. Increased internationalisation of local campuses will not only enhance global recognition of local institutes but also promote an increase in the standards of local colleges and universities, which will benefit local students as well. The success of existing international students is a key factor that will determine whether Malaysia is to succeed in becoming an education hub which attracts well-qualified students from around

the world. Considering the social and academic functions of language, the effective learning and teaching of English as a second language to this student group would play a major role in this equation. Therefore, this study will provide useful information not only on the participants' language learning beliefs, but also on their perceptions of context and course specific factors related to learning English in Malaysia. While this section has described the importance of this study in relation to the Malaysian education industry, the following section looks at the significance of this study in terms of research into learner beliefs and perceptions.

1.5.2. Research into Learner Beliefs & Perceptions

Language learning beliefs have been studied in a variety of cultural contexts, with different learner groups and target languages. For example, using the BALLI and other questionnaires, researchers have examined the language learning beliefs of international ESL learners in the United States (Horwitz, 1988), English for Academic Purpose (EAP) learners in Australia (Bernat, 2006) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Taiwan (Yang, 1999), Turkey (Altan, 2006) and Finland (Rantala, 2002).

In Malaysia, the BALLI has been used by Nikitina and Furuoka (2006, 2006a, 2007) to examine the language learning beliefs of Malaysian university students learning Russian as a foreign language. Up to the time of writing, the language learning beliefs of international students learning English in Malaysia have yet to be described. Although this study will generate useful information for stakeholders in the Malaysian education industry and researchers looking at learner beliefs and perceptions, there are also certain limitations to the applicability of the data collected. These limitations, as well as the scope of the study, will be outlined in the next section.

1.6. Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study involved a small group of participants studying in one college in Kuala Lumpur. In addition to the relatively small sample of 102 participants, the results were also limited by the nationalities of the participants, who were largely from the Middle East and Africa. Thus, the results of this study cannot be generalised to the greater population of international students in Malaysia.

Another limitation of the study was that it largely depends on self-reports from participants. Both the questionnaires and interviews relied on the responses provided by participants. In such situations, there is always the risk that participants respond in the way they believe they should respond, and not in the way they really feel. Nevertheless, using both questionnaires and interviews enabled triangulation of the data.

1.7. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the background to the study as well as provided a statement of the problem. In addition, the objectives of the study along with the research questions were presented in this introductory chapter. Finally, the significance of the study was discussed. The following chapters are ordered as follows: Chapter Two reviews the relevant literature on language learning beliefs as well as learner perceptions. Next, Chapter Three presents a discussion of the methodology used in this study, including the research design, the participants, instruments, data collection methods, research questions and data analysis methods. The results of this study have been divided into two chapters, Chapter Four and Chapter Five. Chapter Four presents the quantitative results and discussion of the BALLI and PELLEM questionnaires. This is followed by the qualitative results and discussion of the semi-structured interviews in Chapter Five. The final chapter, Chapter Six, summarises the key findings of the study and their implications as well as recommendations for future research.