Chapter 5-Qualitative Results and Discussion

5.1. Introduction

The previous chapter, Chapter Four, presented the quantitative results of this study on international students' language learning beliefs and their perceptions of their experience as English language learners in Malaysia. However, the numerical data only represents half the story. While the data collected through the BALLI and PELLEM questionnaires provides an overall numerical picture of the beliefs and perceptions held by this learner group, it also leads to more questions: What factors, experiences or events led participants to circle a particular response to the questions on the PELLEM? This chapter aims to answer these questions, by analyzing and discussing the qualitative results of the semi-structured interviews conducted in the second stage of data collection. More specifically, this chapter addresses Research Question Four: *What are the other factors that influence the learners' perceptions of learning English in Malaysia?*" This chapter is organized as follows 1) Overview of the Semi-structured Interview Stage, 2) Analysis of the Interview Transcripts 3) Factors Emerging from the Interviews.

5.2. Overview of the Semi-structured Interview Stage

As described in Chapter Three of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 participants to collect qualitative data related to participants' perceptions of different aspects related to their experience of learning English in Malaysia.

5.3. Analysis of Interview Transcripts

After transcribing the interviews, the researcher read through all the interviews several times to get an idea of the possible themes within the interview data. Codes were assigned to reveal the potential themes and each transcript was coded individually, with additional codes being created as they emerged from the interview data. Finally, a list of all the codes and their corresponding sub-themes was compiled and this list was analysed to identify the

major themes found in the interview data. Finally, within each of the major themes, salient sub-themes were identified.

5.4. Summary of Themes Emerging from the Interviews

The analysis of the interview transcripts identified four major themes that made up the participants' perceptions of their English language learning experience in Malaysia. Although the semi-structured interviews were guided by the areas identified in the PELLEM, the researcher adopted an open approach while conducting the interview, allowing the flow of topics covered to develop naturally based on the responses provided by the interviewees. As can be expected, participants spoke about a broad variety of areas during the interviews because their experience as international students not only encompassed matters related to learning and using general and Academic English, but also included financial concerns, visa regulations, experiences with authorities and difficulties in adjusting to the local weather, food culture and norms. However, as the focus of this research was on their specific context of being English language learners in Malaysia, the researcher attempted to keep the interviews focused on matters related to participants' perceptions of learning and using English in Malaysia. This focus also guided the analysis of the interview data, to ensure that the qualitative findings of the study would be relevant to the objectives determined at the beginning of the study.

Upon analysis, the themes emerging from the interview data corresponded to the four PELLEM themes, which covered most aspects of the participants' overall experience as international students learning English in Malaysia. The four themes emerging from the interview data were: 1) *Perceptions of Malaysia as an English Language Learning Destination*; 2) *Communication and Interaction Outside Class*; 3) *Perceptions of English in Malaysian Universities* and 4) *Language Learning*. Each of these themes and their underlying sub-themes will be discussed in detail in the following section.

5.5. Theme One: Perceptions of Malaysia as an English Language Learning Destination

Overall, the participants had a positive perception of their experiences as international students learning English in Malaysia, especially when compared to their country of origin. This was true of participants from all the countries represented: Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan and Morocco. However, while participants perceived Malaysia as being a better place to learn English than their home countries, they believed that their potential for learning English in Malaysia was limited by the country's status as a non-native English speaking country. Although English is more widely used in Malaysia when compared to the native countries of participants, they felt that being in a country where it is a native language, for example, the United Kingdom, would be far more beneficial to them as language learners.

Participants' perceptions within this theme are divided into two general areas, which will be covered in the following sections. The first sub-theme under the first theme is participants' overall positive perceptions of Malaysia as an English language learning destination due to the related benefits offered to English language learners in Malaysia, when compared to participants' countries of origin. The second sub-theme is related to a negative aspect of participants' overall perceptions of Malaysia as a destination for learners of English, which is mainly due to the fact that it is not seen as an English-speaking country by most participants. In the following section, a discussion of participants' positive perceptions of Malaysia as a place to learn English will be discussed.

5.5.1. Malaysia offers Better Opportunities to Learn English than My Home Country…

When asked what advice they would give to a friend from home who was considering coming to Malaysia to learn English, all participants said that they would encourage their friends to do so. The main reasons cited by participants were: 1) more opportunities to

practice speaking English, when compared to their home countries,   2) access to native-speaker teachers and teachers of other nationalities and 3) differences in teaching practices. In addition, as all the participants were learning English in order to pursue tertiary education in Malaysia, the educational opportunities offer by local colleges and universities played a big role in their overall perceptions of their learning experience in this country.

One of the main advantages of learning English in Malaysia, according to the participants, was that they were forced to communicate in English both inside and outside the classroom.

> Participant 062, F, Morocco: *"Because few people (here), they talk Arabian…, but Malaysian people, they speak English. You can learn English in Malaysia."*

> Participant 051, F, Libya*: "…for studying English, it's okay. Because for studying English, here is better than in my country. And you have to speak English with people, but in Libya people they all speak Libyan so they can't learn very fast."*

Several compared their English lessons here favourably to those in their countries, where it was commonly taught as one of many school subjects and usually taught in their mother-tongue. Participants perceived language learning as being faster and easier in Malaysia because only English was spoken in the classroom, as teachers could not communicate in the students' mother tongues, unlike in their English language classes back home. Access to native speaker teachers who worked in the college was also seen as a benefit.

> Participant 035, M, Libya: *"In my country, because the teacher speak like Arabic, but in Malaysia, they teach English using English. Can you (you can) learn English faster and can you (you can) like this language."*

> Participant 071, M, Somalia: *"But now…our teachers are foreign teachers. We talk to them in English. We don't try to speak Somali...before…we just order our teacher to explain with us in Somali."*

Participants also perceived a great deal of improvement in their language abilities, which contributed to their positive perceptions of their language learning experience in Malaysia. Six participants spoke about how they had arrived in the country with little or no English skills and had been unable to perform even basic functions in English. After being in

Malaysia for a period of time, however, they felt more confident in their ability to communicate in English since their language skills had improved. Two participants mentioned that they would be good examples to other students who were considering learning English in Malaysia.

> Participant 049, M, Sudan: *"When I come to Malaysia, I can't speak two words together. Now I can speak good, and improve and I can enjoy and joking with my teacher."*

In general, this improvement was attributed to the factors mentioned above: the increased practice and the differences in teaching practice. As the latter concerns language learning, it will be discussed later in this chapter. One significant point was that several participants mentioned that their view of learning English had changed since coming to Malaysia. Participants who had initially felt an aversion to the English language, when learning in their countries, now felt positively about the language. In general, these were the participants who had started out in Malaysia as very low level language learners. As their ability to communicate in English increased, their negative views towards the language were replaced by positive ones.

> Participant 013, M, Sudan: *"In Sudan, when I find, this book is English, I will run away. Because I didn't like any English language when I live in Sudan. At that time, I hate English language…..and now, became I love English language and every time, I would like to speak to any people by English language."*

Ali (2007) studied international students from countries including Sudan, Somalia, Saudi Arabia and Iran who were learning English at a Malaysian university. Although her study aimed to investigate the students' lack of participation in classroom speaking activities, some of the data collected through journals and interviews corresponds with interview data from this theme. Ali's (2007) participants also generally felt positively about learning English in Malaysia, particularly when compared to learning English in their countries. In Ali's study of ESL learners in a preparatory English programme at a local university, one learner pointed out a view similar to that voiced by participants of the present study, saying

that he was forced to speak English in Malaysia, at the shops and with friends of other nationalities (Ali, 2007). However, another participant in Ali's study also stated that the university environment was a better place for English language learners when compared to outside the university (Ali, 2007). This indicates that the learner perceived that English was less widely spoken outside the university environment.

In summary, it can be said that most interview participants in this study felt that Malaysia was a better place to learn English than their own countries. As discussed in this section, the factors which contributed to these positive perceptions were: having more opportunities to speak English, being taught only in the target language and perceiving an improvement in their English language skills. However, from the process of the interviews, it also transpired that although participants found Malaysia preferable to their countries as a place to learn English, most felt that their language learning experience would be better in a country where English is spoken as a native language, for example, the United Kingdom and the United States. Findings related to this negative aspect of participants' perceptions of their learning experience will be discussed in the following section.

5.5.2. Learning English in Malaysia is Good, but I Would Rather Learn English in an English Speaking Country

Although participants found Malaysia a better place to learn English when compared to their countries, most of them felt that the aspects that made Malaysia preferable to their own countries, particularly the opportunity to speak English, would be even better in an English speaking country. The participants' view of Malaysia as a country where English was more a second or foreign language than a first language meant that they expected more opportunities for interaction in countries with more native speakers of English. In Chapter Four of this study, the results of the PELLEM questionnaire showed that 40% of students agreed that the only time they spoke English was in the college. In the interviews, participants expressed their view that lack of communication opportunities they faced in

Malaysia would not be a problem for English learners in the U.S. or the U.K. Other factors, such as the opportunity to work part-time, as well as the use of Bahasa Malaysia on street signs and notices, were also cited as factors that would make Malaysia, more conducive to foreign learners of English.

> Participant 051, F, Libya: *"To be honest, ya , it's (Malaysia) quite good, but if I have the chance, and I could, I prefer to study in , United States."*

> Participant 048, M, Libya: *"Malaysia has many international students here, and a lot of tourisms here. A change for signs on the street, use word English not...that's good for student when he on a road, in a street. He read some word English not Bahasa."*

> Participant 053, M, Somalia: *"Of course, I would be happy, for example if I get the university in the U.S.A or in Australia, I would be happy...Because they are the native English countries. I need English and to speak it fluently and I need, while I am studying to get a part-time job."*

To summarize, participants perceived that the improvement in their English since coming to Malaysia would have reached greater levels if they had been learning English in an Inner Circle country, such as the U.S. or the U.K. To the participants, being in those countries would ensure that they could speak English at every opportunity and give them more access to native speakers of English, both inside and outside class. The many languages in their present environment, for example, Bahasa Malaysia and Tamil, also contributed to this view, since they were exposed to many languages other than English in their daily lives. Had they been learning English in the U.K., for example, participants felt that they would only be exposed to English and, thus, would improve much more quickly. In addition, Malaysia's status as a developing nation, compared to that of developed nations such as the U.K and the U.S. may also have contributed to the participants' perceptions that Malaysia was comparatively a less favourable English language learning destination when compared to an English-speaking country.

Section 5.5 has included a discussion of participants' overall perceptions of Malaysia as a destination for English language learners. Generally speaking, participants were happy with

their language learning experience in Malaysia and found that there were many benefits to learning English in this country when compared to their countries. However, when compared to native English-speaking countries, participants found Malaysia lacking and would rather be in a country where English was more widely spoken, This negative aspect is related to the second theme identified in the interview data, *Communication and Interaction Outside Class*, since the main benefit cited by participants as an advantage of learning English in a native English-speaking country is the increased opportunity to use English outside the classroom. Participants' perceptions with regard to communication and interaction outside class will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

5.6. Theme Two: Communication and Interaction Outside Class

Although the interview participants were generally positive about their learning experience in Malaysia, they had a number of negative perceptions when it came to matters related to communication and interaction with locals outside the college. Participants' perceptions in this theme were generally related to the lack of practice opportunities, which could also be linked to their lack of access to English-speaking Malaysians and negative perceptions of Malaysian English. The findings within this theme will be presented in the following sections, beginning with the first sub-theme which focuses on the limited opportunities for communication as perceived by the interview participants.

5.6.1. Limited Opportunities for Communication

One of the most notable observations in participants' perceptions of their experience outside the classroom was a lack of opportunity to use English in real communication outside the class. Only three of the sixteen participants had social interaction with Malaysians. One Iraqi and one Moroccan participant had Malaysian friends and another Somali participant had Malaysian friends, as he had already started studying at university by the second stage of data collection. The other participants spent most of their day in English classes attended only by other international students, and would return to their homes which they shared with

other students from the same country. In fact, for many of the interview participants, a large number of their neighbours were also from the same country. This limited their chances of interaction in the English language as depicted in the following quote.

> Participant 045, M, Sudan: *"(I speak English) Just in college, for me, when I come back to my condominium, all my condominium live Sudanese, so I can speak Arabic."*

Since participants spent most of their time with other international students, their main interaction with locals was in carrying out everyday transactions such as ordering food in restaurants, going shopping and buying bus or rail tickets. According to the participants, they only spoke minimal English on these occasions.

> Participant 062, F, Morocco: *"In Malaysia, the important thing is you have catalogue. You can see everything, you can pick. I need this one, okay."*

The findings in this sub-theme showed that most of the interview participants felt that they did not have enough opportunities to interact in English outside their language classes. This lack of real communication is also related to the negative perceptions reported under the first theme, discussed earlier, in which participants felt they would have a better English language learning experience in an English-speaking country since there would be more chance to use the English language in daily life. Because the second theme involves participants' perceptions of their experience outside the classroom, the limited chances to use English outside class was a significant issue in the participants' learning experience. However, as can be seen from the first quote above, this was not only due to participants' learning environment, but also due to their living arrangements. Contrary to what the participants of this study believed, research on international students in English-speaking countries also show that they faced the same problems. For example, as discussed in Chapter Four, around a third of the students in Christison and Krahnke's study of ESL students in the U.S. spoke an hour or less of English each day (Christison & Krahnke, 1986). However, most participants in this study seemed to view the lack of practice opportunities as a result of being in Malaysia, rather than of being international students.

This perceived lack of practice opportunities is also probably related to participants' perceptions of Malaysian English, since this is the variety of English that is spoken outside the classroom, in contrast to the Standard British or American English that is taught inside participants' English classes. The interview findings related to this sub-theme will be discussed in the following section.

5.6.2. Perceptions of Malaysian English and the English proficiency of Malaysians

While some participants said that the types of interactions they had with locals only required minimal English, other participants said that they could not speak proper English in these situations because they would not be understood. In this aspect, most participants were conscious that the variety of English spoken locally was different from what they were being taught in class. The differences in the local variety of English, as viewed by participants' were mainly connected to accent and pronunciation, but also encompassed grammatical and vocabulary differences. As all the students came from countries in which English is a foreign language, they valued the standard United Kingdom or United States variety of English and tended to view any variations from these varieties as being 'wrong'.

> Participant 035, M, Libya: *"The pronunciation, the sound…no….no clear."*
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> Participant 074, M, Sudan*: "When I want to talk with someone for them, I feel that...like...accent not clearly. The pronunciation, I don't understand. Sometimes also, they use different words, some Malay mix with English, or 'lah'. Even grammar is wrong sometimes."*

As discussed in Chapter Two and Four, Young (2003) also found similar perceptions among students from China studying English in Singapore. When these students had newly arrived in Singapore, they generally felt that Singaporeans should learn American or British English and stated that Singapore English was not a standard variety of English. However, unlike the present participants, those in Young's study did not necessarily consider Singaporean English as being incorrect. One interesting aspect of Young's study was that it investigated the changes in the Chinese students' perceptions towards Singapore English and found

students grew more accepting of the variety over time (Young, 2003). Although the Chinese students in Singapore may be more likely to adjust to Singapore English due to the ethnicity, culture and language they share with the majority group in Singapore, the fact that the international students in Malaysia did not share these similarities with the local population does not necessarily mean that the same change of attitude will not occur. The participants in this study were in the early stages of their stay in Malaysia, like those in Young's (2003) study and continued exposure to Malaysian English as well as increasing opportunities for contact and social relationships with Malaysians may result in an increasingly positive view of Malaysian English. On the other hand, the fact that international students from Africa and the Middle East do not have the same ethnic, cultural and linguistic similarities with Malaysians, as the Chinese students in Young's study had with Singaporeans, could result in their negative perceptions of the local variety of English remaining unchanged, even after years of study in Malaysia.

Another study in a comparable context looked at Korean learners of English in South Africa, highlighting that learners from the Expanding Circle are increasingly looking toward Outer Circle countries as places in which to learn English (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2008). Using the terminology proposed by Kachru in his model of World Englishes (Kachru, 1985), Coetzee-Van Rooy proposes that the increasingly global use of English may influence the relative importance of Inner Circle countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia as models of English language learning by offering other, often cheaper, destinations for learning English in the form of Outer Circle countries such as South Africa. The differences between the local variety of English and standard English was also an issue for the Koreans who were learning English in South Africa as surveyed by Coetzee-Van Rooy and one student stated the town in which the study was based was not a good place to learn English, as the English spoken by locals was "very Afrikaans" (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2008: 6).

The negative perceptions held by the participants in the present study about the local variety of English is also related to the low estimation the participants have towards the English proficiency of Malaysians. In other words, not only did they view Malaysian English as a non-standard variety of English, but they also felt that most Malaysians were unable to use English for more than very basic communicative functions.

> Participant 017, M, Iraq: *"But in the street or shop, no, I cannot use any sentence. Because Chinese, or Malay or Indian cannot speak very good English. Maybe a little, but the same with me."*

> 053, M, Somali: *"I don't speak much English outside class...I speak little bit easy language, not difficult. Because if you speak the language correctly, they will not understand."*

> Participant 038, M, Somalia: *"Malaysia is not an English-speaking country. Most Malaysians cannot use English for a lot of things. I mean, they can ask for things in shops, but I cannot speak to them about the same things I would speak to my friends."*

Another factor that may have contributed to participants' negative perceptions of Malaysian English is the fact that Malaysia is a multilingual country. With three main languages spoken, in addition to English, there is a fair bit of code-switching that occurs when Malaysians are speaking any language, including English (Baskaran, 2002). The presence of unfamiliar words may further add to the confusion faced by the international students, especially those who are not proficient users of English. Also, as a majority of the participants in this study were monolingual, code-switching may seem like inappropriate language use to these learners and they may interpret code-switching as a language used by low-proficiency users of English.

Despite the generally negative view on Malaysian English speakers, there were mixed perceptions on whether practicing with locals would help participants in improving their speaking skills. Although two participants expressed concern that they would learn the wrong type of English or acquire incorrect pronunciation through interaction with locals, for

most participants, any communicative practice, whether with a Malaysian, or a 'native speaker', was considered beneficial.

> Participant 008, F, Kyrgyzstan: *"If you speak in English you can speak, if this person who speak with me, if he knows English language of course (whether) it's Malaysian, or African or any person... I must speak with them in English and my English will improve."*

> Participant 013, M, Sudan: *"I think anyone from any country just speak a little English, I will learning from him anything. Any country."*

When the comments made by participants are analysed, it appears that participants have a poor opinion of Malaysian English and do not rate the English language skills of Malaysians very highly. However, when asked whether they knew any Malaysians socially, participants mostly said that other than the staff at the college, they did not know many locals. This indicates that participants views related to locals and the English language were formed based on their limited interaction with service industry workers. In many cases, these workers may not even be Malaysians, but what is more significant is that service workers tend not to be from the educated or middle-income classes of Malaysians, where high levels of English proficiency are usually found. Thus, participants' views of Malaysian English and the English proficiency of Malaysians have been formed without much exposure to Malaysians, other than service industry workers and clerical staff.

Although problems with the local variety of English appear to particularly relevant to students who learn English in countries outside the traditional English learning destinations, such as the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, referred to as the Inner Circle countries by Kachru (1985), international students in these countries have also encountered problems understanding English spoken by the locals. East (2001) states that international students in Australia also face problems related to the local variety of English, echoing the findings of this study as depicted in the interview excerpts on the previous page.

As the British and American variety of English are more commonly taught around the world, international students in Australia have to adjust to variations in vocabulary, accent and speed of talking, while trying to improve their English for university. Wang, Singh, Bird & Ives (2008) found similar problems in their study of Taiwanese nursing students in Australia. In another English speaking country, Mehdizadeh & Scott (2005) explored the adjustment issues faced by international students from Iran when they attended university in Scotland. They recommended that students undergo language training to increase their exposure to the Scottish accent before going to Scotland (Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005). This indicates that the local accent posed an issue to international students studying at Scottish universities, as they did in this study. While the Australian and Scottish accents are often regarded as harder for learners of English to comprehend when compared to British English, a survey study of international students in London also found problems dealing with English accents. In a study by Lord & Dawson, (2002), the international students reported that the broad variety of English accents they encountered made communication in English challenging. Lee (1997) also states that international students in American universities often have trouble comprehending their lecturers if they are not familiar with American English, or if there is a lot of idiomatic language used in lectures.

As international students face problems adjusting to local English variety in countries where it is a native language, the problem has also been noted by those doing research on English learners in Outer Circle countries where English has historical significance, but where an indigenized variety of the language is spoken widely. As mentioned previously, Young (2003) reported that Chinese students had trouble understanding Singapore English. This finding was echoed by the participants of a study by Sng et al. (2009) on a mixed nationality group of international students in Singapore. Among other things, these students found the Singapore English accent, which is comparable to the Malaysian English one, unappealing (Sng et al., 2009). In another similar context, a study of Korean ESL learners in South

Africa also found issues with the local variety of English (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2008). The wide variety of Englishes spoken in both native English speaking countries and Outer Circle countries poses communication challenges for international students. However, since Malaysian English does not have the same global acceptance as American or British English, there is probably less motivation on the part of participants to understand or learn about this local variety. In addition, their negative perceptions of Malaysian English are probably directed towards the low colloquial variety of English, rather than towards standard Malaysian English. These negative perceptions probably affect participants' communication outside the classroom, further limiting their interaction opportunities. When participants begin their academic programmes at university, there is a possibility that their perceptions of Malaysian English could change, particularly if they build relationships with Malaysians who are proficient in English. On the other hand, participants' existing negative perceptions could limit their interaction with local students since the participants' may not be very motivated to seek out interaction opportunities if they feel that speaking English with Malaysians will not be beneficial in terms of improving their proficiency. A lack of social interaction and limited access to English-speaking Malaysians, which will be discussed in the following section, could also have contributed to participants' perceptions of Malaysian English.

5.6.3. Social Isolation and Limited Access to English-speaking Malaysians

Being in an English programme designed for international students, participants had limited access to English-speakers other than their teachers and college staff. This was exacerbated by their living arrangements, whereby almost all participants lived among people from their home country. Thus, their exposure to Malaysians outside the classroom was limited to workers in shops, restaurants and public transportation workers. English proficiency in Malaysia is generally higher among the middle and upper classes and among the educated and professional segments of society. However, like international students in other

countries, these participants generally had limited budgets, which did not allow them to live in areas where the English-speaking communities live. All these factors combined to create a situation in which the participants had little or no access to Malaysians who were proficient in English, other than those they encountered at the college. This social isolation not only made for a learning context in which participants had very limited interaction opportunities outside the classroom, but may also have contributed to participants' negative views towards Malaysian English. Since their experience of Malaysian English speakers was largely limited to those with low English proficiency, it is not hard to see why participants perceived Malaysian English as an incorrect variety of English.

For example, Participant 038 said that most Malaysians were unable to communicate in English beyond basic daily transactions, yet when asked whether he knew any Malaysians socially, he replied in the negative. His perceptions of the English proficiency of Malaysians were based on short interactions with service industry workers and clerical staff at the universities to which he was applying.

In addition to their language problems with locals, some participants felt that the Malaysians they met did not like speaking to foreigners or did not like speaking English.

> Participant 072, M, Sudan: *"I don't know…most of them don't like to speak English. They are not social people. I think for foreigners, they don't like to speak with the foreigners, either."*

> Participant 071, M, Somalia: *"… when I want to go to the supermarket or when I want to… I try to speak English as much as I can and I try to joking with the person. But unfortunately, to be honest, Malay people don't want to speak English more than just one word." "*(It doesn't matter)*...whether Malaysian or other foreign, but the problem is if the other people don't want to speak English. That is the problem.*

In summary, the findings related to participants' out-of-class experience fall into two main areas. Firstly, participants had limited opportunities for authentic language practice outside their English class. This is largely due to their learning and socio-cultural contexts as participants in an English course catering to international students and as international

students in Malaysia. Secondly, participants had a negative perception of Malaysian English, which could be a result of their limited communication outside class as well as their limited access to Malaysians.

Limited opportunity for communication is a common issue in many language learning situations. This is particularly true in an English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) situation and is seen to be less of a concern in an English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) context. Learning English in Malaysia can be either an EFL or an ESL situation, depending on context specifics. Based on the data collected from the interviews, participants are learning English in an EFL context as their communication in the language is largely limited to the classroom. Although they are forced to use English to interact with Malaysians, their actual need to do so is limited due to contextual reasons. Once they progress to academic programmes, this situation is likely to change as participants will be enrolled in programmes among local students and will have more opportunity to use English, at least in carrying out their academic tasks. However, whether their social access to English speaking Malaysians increases depends on their ability and willingness to build relationships with their local classmates and, of course, on whether this is reciprocated by their future classmates.

In a study of international postgraduate students at a Malaysian university, Pandian (2008) found that they had mostly positive perceptions of their social interactions with their local classmates and the local community. However, several participants mentioned that local students tended to avoid communication with them and did not behave in a friendly manner (Pandian, 2008). A few participants in Pandian's study also perceived discrimination from Malaysians. Overall, the participants felt that they did not have as many social interactions with local students as they would have liked (Pandian, 2008) and many socialised mainly among students from their own countries. As described earlier, Pandian's (2008) findings were echoed by several participants, who perceived that locals did not want to communicate

with them. For example, when asked whether he faced problems in communicating with Malaysians, one participant responded as follows:

> Participant 072, M, Sudan: *"(Communication problems with)...Malaysians?, yes definitely. Yes, the Malays(Malaysians) to me is like, I don't know. Most of them they don't like to speak English. They are not social people. I think they don't like to speak with the foreigners either. For me I am afraid to talk to them...I was be friendly like I used to be in my country and I was surprised. They don't like to speak to others, to foreigners and this kind of stuff. And particularly in this, in other language. Not Malay language.*

According to this student, the main communication problems with Malaysians were due to two factors: the reluctance of Malaysians to be social with foreigners as well as their avoidance of speaking in English. This particular student was talking about interacting with locals in public place. Therefore, it could be assumed that in situations where there was a context to communicate, for example, at university, the situation would be different. However, Pandian's (2008) study shows that similar problems are faced by international students who have already started university. In addition, language difficulties were also cited by the international students in Pandian's (2008) study as well as in another study conducted by Kaur & Sidhu (2009) as a factor that hindered their communication and social relationships.

While the issues discussed in this theme appear to the students to be a result of being in Malaysia, they are actually common in the context of international students in other countries including those where English is a native language, for example, as found by Christison and Krahnke (1986), mentioned earlier in this section. Having limited social contact with locals is also a common theme in studies of other international student groups. For example, Robertson et al. (2000) found feelings of isolation were ranked as being among the most significant problems faced by 48 international students in an Australian university. The participants in Christison and Krahnke's (1986) study, discussed above, also had problems in creating interaction opportunities with Americans. Therefore, certain

challenges faced by the participants of this study are common to international students in general, for example social isolation and trouble making friends with locals. In addition, lack of opportunity to practice speaking a target language is an issue for language learners everywhere. However, the participants' learning context as students in a language programme populated entirely by international students might intensify these problems. Once the students begin university, it is expected that there will be more opportunity to interact with Malaysians; thus, leading to more practice opportunities and social interaction.

The findings in the second theme identified in the interview data have been discussed in this section. In this theme, the participants' perceptions in relation to their experience outside the classroom as learners of English in Malaysia were discussed. Most participants had opted to study English in Malaysia as they had expected more opportunities for practice when compared to their own countries. While this expectation was met, participants still found that they did not have many chances for meaningful interaction in English outside their classroom. They also had to deal with the Malaysian variety of English, which was a different variety than the standard British or American English that they valued. This section has discussed participants' perceptions related to factors outside the classroom, in terms of real communication with Malaysians. In the following section, the findings related to participants' perception of English use in Malaysian universities will be discussed.

5.7. Theme Three: Perceptions of English in Malaysian Universities

Since all but two of the 102 participants in this study were learning English in preparation for academic programmes, their perceptions about the use of English in Malaysian universities were considered an important factor in their overall perceptions of their learning experience. However, as only two of the interview participants had started university by the time the interviews were conducted, the participants' perceptions of English in Malaysian universities were largely derived from the opinions and experiences of people they knew. All of them had friends or family studying at local universities, and their perceptions were

undoubtedly influenced by the stories they had heard from them. The main findings in this area centred around participants' tendency to underestimate the level of English proficiency necessary to cope in a Malaysian academic programme. This corroborated the findings from the related PELLEM items as discussed in Chapter Four. In addition, most participants were very confident, perhaps even over confident, about the adequacy of their present language skills in view of the language demands they would face upon enrolling at university. Ransom, Larcombe and Baik (2005), who studied the perceptions and expectations of international students at the University of Melbourne, found that there was a significant gap between the students' expectations and the support services offered to ESL learners. A similar situation could be occurring in the Malaysian context, particularly when international students enter universities with unrealistic conceptions of the need for proficiency in the language that will be the medium of instruction. Their success at university depends not only on the students' own ability to cope with these difficulties, but also on the measures taken by host institutions to support them.

5.7.1. Underestimation of Importance of English in an Academic Programme

Interview participants were asked to estimate the level of language proficiency necessary to do well at university. The interview participants had varied views in this area, ranging from completion of the Pre-intermediate course (IELTS band 3-4) up to completion of the Academic Skills for IELTS course (IELTS band 5-6). This was generally influenced by the level that they were enrolled in. In general, those students in the higher levels tended to estimate a higher level of proficiency when compared to those who were in the lower levels. Considering that the Pre-intermediate level is when students are first introduced to a four paragraph essay in the writing component of the course, participants' expectations that this would be sufficient to cope in an English-medium academic programme appears to be a great underestimation.

In most cases, participants' estimations were also influenced by university entry requirements. As many Malaysian universities accept an IELTS band of 5.5 or 6, participants tended to cite this as the necessary level of proficiency in order to do well academically.

> Participant 053, M, Somalia: *"I think the one who get 5.5 can start university, can understand everything, can read books, can make some researches or projects, yes..."*

On the topic of university entry requirements, one participant who was headed for a postgraduate degree said that the entry requirement for university entrance into Malaysian universities was too high. He pointed out that the entry requirement for Malaysian universities should be much lower than that of universities in English- speaking countries such as Australia and the U.K. This could mean that perceptions held by these students with regard to Malaysian English and the English proficiency of Malaysians could play a role in the participants' low estimation of the need for English in academic programmes.

While participants generally underestimated the need for English proficiency at university, most were aware that international students often face language problems at university. In fact, at least three mentioned people that they knew who had started academic programmes with only Beginner or Elementary level English proficiency and had then faced problems.

> Participant 074, M, Sudan: *"Yes, yes. I know someone when I came to Malaysia. Before study course language English, he applied already in university and accept him. But after he started, he faced big problem. Now he dropped semester and he study English language. I think all the problems like this"*

Another participant mentioned that many international students plagiarized their university projects because of weak language skills.

> Participant 038, M, Somalia: *"...they paste and copy, they copy from the Internet, from other papers and, they just paste them to their work, but the problem is if they write it themselves, it's gonna be difficult. They are gonna have grammatical mistakes."*

Interestingly, this participant felt that students like those he was describing were academically ready for university, but only faced language problems. This illustrates that many participants did not understand the close connection between language skills and academic skills and may be ill-prepared to handle the language demands of university.

The participants' perceptions that being prepared for university was more an academic issue than a language related issue may have lead to their optimism and overconfidence in terms of the adequacy of their own language skills. This significant finding is the second sub-theme related to participants perceptions of English use at university and will be covered in the following section.

5.7.2. Optimism and Overconfidence-Expectations about Academic Programmes

The group of participants for the interview stage of data collection was generally very confident about their language skills and had high expectations about their potential success in the academic programmes they planned to enrol in, which is representative of the responses to items on the PELLEM by the larger group of participants. Only three of the 16 interview participants expressed any worries about facing language problems at university. The others generally felt that their English language skills would enable them to cope with the language demands of an academic programme. Generally, the higher the English proficiency level of student, the more confident they were. However, there were also students who had yet to complete the Pre-intermediate level course who felt ready for university.

> Participant 043, M Somalia: *"No, I am not worried. Because when the university accepted for me. Yes, UNISEL university accepted for me. I will go in May. When they accepted for me, they make me, they test for language. If I pass for language, I began for my faculty. For that faculty, there is a subject which is English... I am not worried, because in my secondary, I was adapted to studying in English but I can't speak only..."*

Overall, participants in this study differed significantly from those in studies of international students in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and the U.K. In Ransom et al. (2005), 70% of the 377 ESL students in the study felt that English language skills were '*very important*' to academic success, while 29% felt it was '*somewhat important*' (Ransom et al., 2005). Another study of international students in Australia by Sawir (2005) also found a similar appreciation for the value of English proficiency for academic and social reasons.

Whether the participants' are viewed as being optimistic or as being unrealistic, it can be concluded from the findings that they are likely to minimize the role of English in academic performance. This could be due to a number of factors. Firstly, the participants' low regard for Malaysian English and the English proficiency of Malaysians, as discussed in Theme Two, could have led to their overestimating their language skills or minimizing the potential challenges at university. They could be judging their future classmates' and lecturers' English skills based on their interactions with service workers. Also, participants may view the variation in Malaysian English accents, when compared to British or American English, as being a sign of low proficiency.

In studies conducted by Pandian (2008) and Kaur & Sidhu (2009) on international students in Malaysian universities, language difficulties were reported to be a factor in the students' social and academic lives. However, it is interesting to note that the international students in Pandian and Kaur & Sidhu's studies cited their own limitations in English rather than focusing on the low proficiency of locals. The international postgraduates in Kaur & Sidhu's (2009) study reported being conscious of their own accents and language proficiency when interacting with local students. Moreover, several students in Pandian's (2008) study stated that the local students laughed at the way they spoke. This is in contrast to the perceptions reported by the participants in the present study, who tended to focus more on what they perceived as deficiencies in the English spoken by Malaysians, rather than focusing on their own weaknesses in English. This could corroborate the contention

made earlier in this chapter, that the international students' overconfidence in their English could be caused by their lack of exposure to educated Malaysians. Their generalisation of Malaysians' English proficiency based on limited interactions with shop assistants other service workers may have given the participants in the present study a false sense of security about the sufficiency of their language abilities. This could be part of the reason why the participants in the present study tended to be highly confident and to underestimate the level of English proficiency they will need at university, for example, as expressed by in the excerpt below.

> Participant 071, M, Somalia: *"I didn't worry about it because I am self-confident. Because when I finished most of the course at (this college), I am very confident."*

Another possible reason for this phenomenon could be socio-cultural factors. As discussed in Chapter Four, the results of the BALLI survey showed that these participants tended to be more confident that those in previous BALLI studies. This confidence would influence their expectations of success at university. In Chapter Four, socio-cultural factors were offered as a possible reason for high confidence levels, as a previous BALLI study by Siebert (2003) proposed that Middle Eastern students appeared to be more confident than Asian students based on their responses to BALLI items on difficulty of language learning and time required to study a language. This was corroborated by the BALLI and PELLEM findings of this study, as presented in Chapters Four and Five, where the participants tended to underestimate difficulty levels, overestimate their own abilities and have high expectations of success. It appears that the high confidence levels of Middle Eastern students could also be an influential factor in the interview findings in this theme.

Finally, Malaysia's status as a developing nation and a non-native English speaking country may also play a role in participants' underestimation of the language demands at a local university. It is highly probable that participants from Africa and the Middle East would be

more intimidated by the prospect of coping in a British university than a Malaysian university. As seen in previous research on international students in Australia and the U.K., the international students were very concerned about their English skills, which is contradictory to the present findings. Students from one developing nation moving to another developing nation are less likely to feel intimidated by their lecturers and local classmates when compared to students from a developing nation who study in a developed nation, such as the U.S., the U.K. and Australia.

As proposed in Chapter Four, in explaining participants' confidence and optimism with regard to their beliefs about language learning, certain contextual factors could also be contributing reasons for the participants' views. More learner training is required, not only to correct misconceptions about language learning and teach participants about effective language learning strategies, but also to educate participants on the nature of language use at universities so that they will be better prepared to face the challenges ahead. For example, participants may not be aware of the types of tasks they will be required to complete at university and may assume that the kinds of tasks in the ESL classroom are similar to what they will be doing at university. If language teachers demonstrate the kinds of texts participants will be required to read and produce, then perhaps they will have a more realistic idea of the level of English proficiency that is required for an academic programme.

In addition, having some sort of standardized measure to assess applicants' English language proficiency for admission into Malaysian universities and colleges would also help give participants a greater understanding of the necessity for language proficiency to succeed at university. At present, universities and colleges have various ways to accept those applicants who do not achieve the necessary IELTS band, for example, by applying their own English placement test, and allowing international students to begin their academic programmes while taking English proficiency courses at the same time, for example, as described in Hamzah et al. (2009). This reinforces participants' misconception

that English proficiency of a certain standard is nothing more than a requirement that has to be fulfilled in order to be accepted into and to graduate from university, instead of a necessity to function well in academic programmes.

In this section, the participants' interview responses with regard to their expectations and perceptions of English in Malaysian universities have been discussed. In general, it can be said that this group of learners is not fully aware of the implications that English language proficiency has on their future academic performance at university. In addition, participants seemed to overestimate their language abilities and had few concerns about facing language problems when they start university. The first three themes resulting from the semi-structured interviews looked at participants' perceptions of factors outside the classroom, namely, *General Opinion of Malaysia as an English language learning destination*, *Out-of-class experience* and *Perceptions of English in Malaysian universities*, the final theme focuses on the language learning process itself. The results related to this theme are discussed in the following section.

5.8. Theme Four: Language Learning

While the interviews mainly focused on participants' opinions about issues directly related to learning and using English in Malaysia, some questions also sought participants' views about matters related to language learning itself. These questions were more related to the BALLI than the PELLEM, and sought further information about the strategies employed by participants to improve their English and their opinions on factors that contribute to language learning success.

5.8.1. What Makes a Good Language Learner?

Based on the data in the earlier themes, it was evident that many participants were learning English mainly to achieve a certain score on the IELTS test or university English placement tests, rather than to have the necessary skills to pursue academic study in the English-

medium. Despite varying ideas on what they considered successful language learning, participants had clear ideas on what a learner should do to improve their English language skills as they had spent two months or more in the intensive English programme.

Participants were well aware of individual differences in language learning, as many said success in language learning depended on individual learners. As reported in Chapter Four, in their responses to the BALLI items on foreign language aptitude and individual characteristics that influence language learning, a majority of the 102 participants in this study had endorsed the belief in foreign language aptitude and age as having a positive effect on language learning. However, in the interviews, participants tended to value other types of individual characteristics. Most participants cited attitudinal factors such as being motivated, being dedicated and putting in a lot of effort as the primary factors. Although one or two participants also acknowledged the role played by natural ability, they mentioned it alongside attitude. Therefore, despite the belief in foreign language aptitude as found in the BALLI survey, participants were more likely to attribute the success of language learners to motivation and the willingness to work towards acquiring a language.

> Participant 072, M, Sudan*: "Everyone can learn a language, but it is the effort that makes a difference."*
>
> Participant 071, M, Somalia: *"Some of the students, they always read and write every time. And some of them, they don't… they don't like to make practice anything, but other people, they practice all the time."*
>
> Participant 053, M, Somalia: *"It depends on how, the effort, that he paid and the time he spends to study hard. It depends the hard-working student."*

In the interviews, when participants spoke about how students can be successful at language learning, they often used the phrase '*hard-working*' or contrasted it with '*lazy*' to describe the types of learners who succeed in learning English and those who fail. When asked to elaborate on the types of actions carried out by a good language learner, participants spoke mainly about communicative practice. This contrasts with the quantitative BALLI results, as discussed earlier, which appeared to indicate that a large percentage of the 102

participants in this study had a high regard for vocabulary learning, grammar learning and translation as the most important parts of language learning. As depicted in the quotation below, while participants acknowledged the importance of learning about grammar, they considered communicative practice the key to developing language skills.

> Participant 013, M, Sudan: *"The first time, you have to know any rule about grammar and about writing about anything. And you learn more vocabulary and anything and after that you have to do a lot of practice. Without practice, you can't learn English language."*

In comparison, the data collected from the semi-structured interviews presents a very different picture from the results in Chapter Four, as far as participants' views of language learning are concerned. The interview participants were clearly aware that practice was necessary if they wanted to improve their English. One explanation for the contradictory results is that the 16 interview participants had different perceptions when compared to the whole sample of 102 participants. However, the more likely explanation for this discrepancy is the limitations of the closed-choice questionnaire.

On the BALLI, the items related to 'formal learning beliefs' were worded in a way that did not allow participants to rank different language components in relation to each other. For example, item 17 states "The most important part of language learning is learning new vocabulary." It is likely that participants who strongly agreed with this item, as well as the ones on grammar and translation, were only indicating that they found these components important. However, this does not necessarily mean that they think grammar or learning vocabulary is more important to language learning than communicative practice.

During the interview, many participants described successful language learners as those who were motivated and hard-working enough to seek ways to practice the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is heartening to note that many interview participants also tied language learning success closely to self-directed learning, pointing

out that the five hours of lessons per day would not suffice if someone wanted to learn a language well.

> Participant 052, M, Somalia*: "Yea, the first advice is to be hard working, to work hard and to learn all your studies. And some students they don't care. They just want to study what they took from this school, only just the book, they read the book. That is not enough."*

> Participant 049, M, Sudan*: "Because when you study at college that is not enough. Because you must be improve your English at house. Because there is many things you can't say at college because that is social (sic) life."*

> Participant 051, F, Libya: *"Also some students feel that class work is enough. They come to the class, listen to the teacher and do the activities, but outside class they forget about English. This type will not improve fast. If you want to improve fast, you must plan your learning. In class is for guidance only, but you must use the things from class and the book, by speaking, reading, writing and listening. Look for different ways to practice, correct your own mistakes. Otherwise, there is no meaning. You will know the language only in your head, as a subject."*

Participants' view that practice is necessary to succeed in language learning corresponds with representations of the good language learner as described by other researchers. In their summary of research into successful language learners, Norton & Toohey (2001) state that previous research depicted several aspects of good language learners, including that they were actively involved in the language learning process and that they used the target language to communicate and interact. However, Norton & Toohey (2001) also point out that the recent socio-cultural perspective in SLA research highlights the importance of access to different types of communication, or 'communities of practice', in order for learners to be successful (Norton & Toohey, 2001). In other words, even though a learner has the traits that may have previously been identified as being those of a good language learner, without the socio-cultural context in which to use a language, it will be hard for learners to develop much fluency in their target language. The absence of such a context for the learners in this present study has already been discussed, not only in Chapter Four, but also in the second theme of the interview results.

Despite the lack of opportunity in which to use English in real-life, the participants show an awareness of the importance of practice in order to improve their English. In addition to clear ideas on what makes a good language learner, participants put these ideas into practice as can be seen from the learning strategies they employed. The following section covers the various methods participants used in their attempt to improve their language skills.

5.8.2. Language Learning Strategies

From participants' views on the factors that contribute to successful language learning, the interviews moved on to the participants themselves and the various strategies they used to develop their English language skills. As described in the previous section, participants viewed practice as being the most crucial factor in language learning success, and this was reflected in the types of examples of things they did to improve their English. Most interview participants stated that they tried to speak English as much as possible, both inside and outside the college, despite the limitations described in the second theme, *Out-of-Class Experience*.

> Participant 062, F, Morocco*: "I read, no important books, but, like reading one paragraph about some inventor, about someone. Um question, and I answer the question, like reading in exam."*

> Participant 051, F, Libya*: "... I try to focus on speaking because I have a problem of speaking. I can't speak very well, but grammar is okay, my listening is okay. So I do a lot of reading and writing."*

> Participant 043, M , Somalia*: "I do reading at home, more writing to practice at home. On diff topics, my daily routine, my family, my classmates., my teachers. I do this things. I listen movies, watch movies. These things I improve my skills."*

> Participant 053, M , Somalia*: "I need more practice inside class and outside class. Always I try to communicate the people, also I wrote something. At home I study hard and I communicate with my friends and my roomie to practice the English language."*

Overall, participants felt that language practice was a very good way to improve their English. Based on their interview responses, they put in a lot of work outside class and also enjoyed listening to English music and watching English movies. A study of international ESL learners at a private college in Malaysia found similar strategy preferences among

learners (Othman, 2005). Most participants in Othman's study reported speaking in English, listening to English music and watching English movies as their preferred ways to use English (Othman, 2005).

In the fourth theme related to language learning, the first two sub-themes were related to participants' perceptions about language learning, as far as their ideas about what a good language learner should do, as well as their choice of learning strategy. The third, and final, sub-theme looks at participants' perceptions of the English language course they were taking at the time of the study, as presented in the following section.

5.8.3. Learning English in a Malaysian Educational Institute

Data from the interview participants supported the quantitative results from the fourth PELLEM theme on *Learning English in a Malaysian Educational Institute*. In both the PELLEM and the interviews, participants had positive perceptions of the language course they were enrolled in and made positive remarks about their teachers, the teaching method, curriculum and materials. Nevertheless, they also made suggestions on certain improvements they would like to see. Generally, most participants felt that there should be less focus on grammar and more on reading and writing skills. Participants also felt that the syllabus should move away from General English to encompass more aspects of Academic English. A few students also pointed out the need for more interaction opportunities outside the classroom.

> Participant 052, M, Somalia*: "…(this college) need to change the system, the system, especially   as we know a lot of students come here to study the university. And universities academic about reading writing. In (this college) focus mainly on grammar, when you start at beginner until intermediate, focus on grammar. So I think it's a good idea to focus on reading writing is better. And many students, you are manager and you know what the students are saying. The students complain about reading writing, no one complain about grammar, no one complain about speaking."*

Participant 035, M, Libya: *"Yes, some points. Mmm, you have long free time. And...writing and reading every day more. Some teachers don't make some conversation in the class."*

Participant 008, F, Kyrgyzstan*: "I hope to change to spend in the college more time, than now. Because when I finish my class, I go directly to the library and I sit here. But most students they can't speak in English and of course I can't get from them some information about English. If we stayed here a long time, with teachers and with students, maybe we can speak more easier and more faster. We need to speak more."*

Two other studies of international students learning in Malaysia, Ali (2007) and Hamzah et al. (2009) had contradictory results from those found in this study. Both studies differed from the present one in terms of learning context as they involved students who had already been accepted into university programmes but were required to complete an English course. In contrast, the students in the present study were at an earlier stage of their learning experience in Malaysia and were in a local college learning English while applying to university. Ali's (2007) study, which aimed to investigate the reasons behind the reluctance of ESL learners to participate in speaking activities, found generally positive perceptions of the language course, especially when compared to participants' previous language courses. However, since Ali's (2007) study did not aim to identify learners' perceptions of the language course, perhaps any negative views that arose during data collection were not reported. Conversely, as described in Chapter Four, those in Hamzah et al.'s (2009) study were less positive about their language course. They were postgraduate students who had not fulfilled the English entry requirements and were required to take and pass a language course. Only 15 out of the 130 students surveyed by Hamzah et al. (2009) made positive comments about their language course, while 51 had negative things to say about the teaching methods, teachers' speaking skills, course materials, and suitability of course and facilities. Hamzah et al. concluded that many of these problems were because the students were not placed in different levels according to proficiency, but grouped together, which meant that higher level learners were not sufficiently challenged, while lower level learners

were not equipped to deal with the materials being covered (Hamzah et al., 2009). The large size of classes may also have been a contributing factor. In addition, the fact that the learners had already been accepted into university may have contributed to their negative perceptions since they might have lost motivation. In contrast, the learners in the present study were still working towards being accepted into university, so their motivation levels were still high.

5.9. Conclusion

This chapter has presented the qualitative results of the interviews conducted with 16 participants. Overall, participants have positive views about Malaysia as a destination for learners of English. However, participants also perceive Malaysia as a country where English is a foreign language, although it is more widely spoken in this country than in their own countries. Thus, they are not able to practice English in outside class as much as they would like to. Furthermore, the local variety of English is viewed by these international students as being inferior to British or American English. This can be traced to two possible contributing factors. Firstly, participants do not have access to English-speaking Malaysians, due to their living situations among others from their home country and the fact that all their classmates in the English course are international students. This limits their chances of interaction with the kinds of Malaysians who are proficient in English. In addition, it could be that regardless of their access to Malaysians, these participants would still consider Malaysian English as inferior because it does not sound like the Standard English that is highly valued in their countries.

While administrators and teachers may not be able to do much about the perceptions of Malaysia and Malaysian English, another significant finding from the interviews can be addressed by those dealing with international students. This issue is the participants' tendency to underestimate the importance of English proficiency in Malaysian academic programmes. The interview results showed that participants were largely influenced by

university admission requirements in forming their estimations of the language proficiency needed to succeed in an English-medium academic programme. If local universities continue to accept students who have minimal levels of English proficiency, international students will continue to minimize the role of language skills in academic success. While confidence and optimism are generally positive things, unrealistic expectations will lead to disappointment and an overall dissatisfaction with both their language learning and academic experiences. The following chapter will present the conclusion of this study and discuss the various implications of its findings.