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(Malaysia, Sarawak, Bintulu), e-mail: joyce@upm.edu.my**PERSONAL GROWTH THROUGH ENGLISH PROFICIENCY:
A CASE STUDY IN SARAWAK**

Abstract. Globally, English is known as the most spoken language. In Malaysia, learners may face challenges in learning English as a second language; however, the capability to master the language is believed to be able to develop one's personal growth. Essentially, personal growth in learning involves a continuous change in behaviour, attitudes, and values. Therefore, this case study aimed to understand the learners' personal growth through English proficiency development. A qualitative case study design using a semi-structured interview was utilised to investigate personal growth experiences in English proficiency development. Interviews were conducted as the most compelling way to understand the participants' narrative descriptions and subsequently uncover the meaning of their values, beliefs, and experiences. Data collected was analysed using Morse's four stages of analysis to extract the essence of the participants' lived experiences. Five themes emerged as personal growth experienced by the learners, namely, the courage to take risks, individual values in diversity, enriched interpersonal relationships, cognitive adjustment, and positive attitudes. The findings provided educators with some indications and a holistic view of the learners' lived experiences of personal growth through English proficiency development which is often an overlooked issue during the teaching and learning process.

Keywords: Case study, English proficiency, learner, personal growth, qualitative study.

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(Малайзия, Саравак, Бинтулу қ.), e-mail: joyce@upm.edu.my**Ағылшын тілін меңгеру арқылы тұлғалық өсу: Саравактағы кейс-стади**

Аңдатпа. Бүкіл әлемде ағылшын тілі ең көп таралған тіл ретінде белгілі. Малайзияда студенттер ағылшын тілін екінші тіл ретінде үйренуде қиындықтарға тап болуы мүмкін;

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дегенмен, тілді меңгеру қабілеті тұлғалық өсуге ықпал етеді деп саналады. Шын мәнінде, оқу процесінде тұлғалық өсу мінез-құлықтың, көзқарастар мен құндылықтардың үздіксіз өзгеруін қамтиды. Сондықтан бұл кейс-стади ағылшын тілін меңгеру деңгейін арттыру арқылы оқушылардың жеке тұлғалық өсуін түсінуге бағытталған. Жартылай құрылымды сұхбатты қолдана отырып, сапалы кейс-стади дизайны ағылшын тілін меңгерудің дамуындағы тұлғалық өсу тәжірибесін зерттеу үшін қолданылды. Сұхбат қатысушылардың баяндау сипаттамаларын түсінудің және кейіннен олардың құндылықтарының, нанымдары мен тәжірибесінің маңыздылығын ашудың ең сенімді әдісі ретінде жүргізілді. Жиналған мәліметтер қатысушылардың өмірлік тәжірибесінің мәнін тану үшін Морс анализінің төрт кезеңін қолдана отырып талданды. Білім алушылардың тұлғалық өсуінің нәтижесінде бес тақырып пайда болды, атап айтқанда: тәуекелге бару батылдығы, әр түрлі жеке құндылықтар, тұлғааралық қатынастарды байыту, танымдық бейімделу және оң көзқарас. Алынған нәтижелер оқытушыларға ағылшын тілін меңгеру деңгейін арттыру есебінен білім алушылардың жеке тұлғалық өсуінің өмірлік тәжірибесі туралы кейбір нұсқаулар мен тұтас түсінік алуға мүмкіндік берді, ал бұл білім беру үдерісінде жиі назардан тыс қалады.

Кілт сөздер: кейс-стади, ағылшын тілін меңгеру, білім алушы, тұлғалық өсу, сапалы зерттеу.

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Личностный рост через владение английским языком: кейс-стади в Сараваке

Аннотация. Во всем мире английский известен как самый распространенный язык. В Малайзии учащиеся могут столкнуться с трудностями при изучении английского языка в качестве второго языка; однако считается, что способность овладеть языком способствует личностному росту. По сути, личностный рост в процессе обучения предполагает непрерывное изменение поведения, установок и ценностей. Поэтому данное тематическое исследование было направлено на то, чтобы понять личностный рост учащихся за счет повышения уровня владения английским языком. Качественный дизайн кейс-стади с использованием полуструктурированного интервью был использован для изучения опыта личностного роста в развитии владения английским языком. Интервью были проведены как наиболее убедительный способ понять повествовательные описания участников и впоследствии раскрыть значение их ценностей, убеждений и опыта. Собранные данные были проанализированы с использованием четырех этапов анализа Морса, чтобы извлечь суть жизненного опыта участников. Пять тем возникли в результате личностного роста учащихся, а именно: смелость идти на риск, разнообразные индивидуальные ценности, обогащенные межличностные отношения, когнитивная адаптация и позитивное отношение. Полученные результаты позволили преподавателям получить некоторые указания и целостное представление о жизненном опыте личностного роста учащихся за счет повышения уровня владения английским языком, что часто упускается из виду в процессе преподавания и обучения.

Ключевые слова: кейс-стади, владение английским языком, учащийся, личностный рост, качественное исследование.

Introduction

Given the importance of English as one of the most widely spoken languages globally, non-native English-speaking learners must master the essence of this international language to effectively communicate (Paramjit Kaur & Nooraida Mahmor, 2014). English is Malaysia's second language, and many organisations and institutions in the country use it to achieve a tremendous international reputation. English is also the language of science and technology, and it is used as a worldwide language to survive in business (Idrees, 2012). Accordingly, English is a language required in all professions.

To become active participants in global activities, English language learners must achieve acceptable competence. Language competence, in broad terms, refers to one's capacity to utilise language for a range of communication reasons. Proficient users are considered to have a good command of the language, which means they can grasp it without trouble, convey a wide variety of ideas clearly in voice and writing, and converse easily with other speakers (Cambridge University Press ELT, 2012). English proficiency is not limited to learners' vocabulary knowledge; it also focuses on applied learning, which helps learners to be engaged and communicative in a good way (Yu, 2010). Therefore, English proficiency is critical in today's information-technology era for pursuing further education, advancing careers, and achieving greater worldwide prospects (Siti Sukainah & Melor, 2014). In addition, the learners' attitude towards the language plays a crucial role in proficiency development. Hardison et al. (2012) reported that positive attitudes regarding the language-learning setting were associated with openness to experience the language. As a result, language attitude is critical for comprehending the basics and other aspects of the language to utilise it effectively.

Literature Review

Undeniably, Malaysian learners may experience difficulties studying English as a second language in Malaysia, notably in Sarawak. Learning barriers range from superficial issues such as opting to use English during English class only to more serious issues such as having very little support in the home environment and community or facing prejudice (Musa et al., 2012). Even when confronted with these difficulties, there are always paths and possibilities for personal improvement when learning English (Adnan, 2013). Therefore, mastery of the language promotes long-term personal development (Anson & Lucus, 2003). English is considered to be a business language and as well as a wheel for career development, especially in engineering sciences, for instance, engineers should learn English in order to be proficient in technical English for reporting (Kenzhaliyev et al., 2021; Zemskova et al., 2022). Essentially, personal growth in learning involves a continuous change in behaviour, attitudes, and values (Vitterso, 2014).

According to Vitters (2014), personal growth is a component of an individual's personality development that contributes to becoming a healthier person in a meaningful way. Furthermore, personal growth is defined by Ryff (1989) as an individual's sense of continuous personal growth and expansion. This growth involves being open to new experiences, having a feeling of potential self-realisation, progressing through time and allowing changes to occur. As a result, the learners' desire to learn English as part of their personal development becomes an important component in acquiring the language. Making future plans and forming worldviews are also part of personal growth. According to Adnan (2013), learners' language knowledge has a practical function, such as facilitating academic growth and future career preparedness. English language, in particular, assists learners in acquiring a broader perspective and a more optimistic approach to life. Learners realise how important it is for them to have a good attitude about English language usage to help them advance in their careers and personal lives (Yang & Lau, 2003).

People with advanced English skills benefit in various ways (Rezaei, & Davoudi, 2016). The realisation that they can confidently converse with others who speak the same language may boost their self-esteem (Siti Sukainah & Melor, 2014). When learners are provided with a supportive

learning environment to practice the language, they can express themselves without being intimidated or shamed (Anson & Lucus, 2003). Immersion in a supportive learning environment aids learners in overcoming social and psychological barriers to English learning. Receiving accurate information from the instructor, being congratulated on meeting objectives, and having space to share ideas are all components of a supportive learning environment (Nizkodubov, 2015). Furthermore, studies show that the English language has a significant positive influence on identity. Learning to speak English is a liberating experience. It is considered to be straightforward and impartial, enabling access to diverse points of view while minimising ethnocentrism. It is also thought to encourage more introspection and critical thinking about one's own culture (Lee, 2001, as cited in Fei et al., 2012). As a result of utilising English as a bridge to understand rich information, legacy, and culture, learners may attain personal growth and self-confidence in functioning as effective and constructive members of society (Paramjit & Mahmor, 2014).

We conducted a qualitative case study to understand learners' personal growth experiences better as they improved their English proficiency. The purpose of this study was to gain a thorough understanding of their language proficiency and how it can help them grow personally from their unique perspectives. Hence, the central research question was: What are the perceived personal growth experiences through English proficiency among learners in Sarawak?

Research methods

The current study employed a qualitative case study approach to provide an in-depth examination of personal growth experienced by learners due to their real-life experiences with English competence (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A qualitative method was utilised to elicit responses that allow individuals to describe and narrate their unique personal growth experiences through in-depth individual interviews. The primary data source was a semi-structured interview. It is the most effective approach to comprehend the participants' points of view and decipher the significance of their values, beliefs, and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Data Collection

Purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) was employed to recruit two Sarawak-based participants. The researcher contacted those who consented to participate in the study to set up the interview location, date, and time. Both identified individuals were questioned at a different time and date using an online platform. The participants signed informed consent forms that included the purpose of the research, expected duration, procedures, participants' right to withdraw from the study, confidentiality restrictions, and contact information for questions regarding the study, and research participants' rights.

Two interviews were performed (one for each participant). The two participants were a 27-year-old Chinese Christian female postgraduate student from a local public university and a 22-year-old Malay Muslim male undergraduate student from a local private institution in Sarawak. The pseudonyms "Lara" (first participant) and "Lucas" (second participant) were used to identify both individuals. Both interview sessions lasted around 45 to 60 minutes. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Data Analysis

The participants' interview questions were recorded and transcribed before being analysed by the researcher. Verbatim and field notes were taken both during and after each interview (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Immediately after signing the informed permission form, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. To maintain the confidentiality and privacy of the processes, the researcher used pseudonyms on all documents (demographic data and interview transcriptions). The Morse's (1994) four phases of analysis were utilised for data analysis to extract the core of the participants' real-life experiences of personal growth. The results were not definite, as is common in qualitative case studies. Nonetheless, they were meant to contribute to the expanding body of information

(Creswell & Poth, 2016) based on the personal growth experienced by learners as a result of English competence.

Results

This research portrayed the learners' improvement as a result of their English competence. In addition, participants discussed their own growth experiences, and five themes emerged from the analysis: the courage to take risks, individual values in diversity, enrich interpersonal relationships, cognitive adjustment, and positive attitudes.

Theme 1: The Courage to Take Risks

The participants emphasised the capacity to have extraordinary bravery to try things they had yet to experience. They stated that they would avoid participating in any activity that required them to speak in English most of the time for fear of being evaluated and criticised.

'Previously, I was not a good English speaker, and I felt shameful to even talk during group discussion. I see everyone able to talk fluently. I was worry that if I start to talk, they will question back me. How would they look at me if my English sounds funny? But I think I can't stay that way forever. So I try to practice speaking and read more in English. Now I even register myself to the public speaking course.' (Lara)

'I speak Bahasa most of the time. When I first entered university, and everyone seemed so good in English, I felt left out. Sometimes I don't even know what were they talking about, and I just smiled. It's hurtful. There's one time when I need to present my assignment in English; I was so down. I don't think I can do it. But my lecturer guided me. He supported me like a brother, and he made me brave to speak. I think I can speak more now, although sometimes it is broken English.' (Lucas)

The participants indicated that learners should attempt to enhance their English proficiency by embracing their flaws and without feeling ashamed of their progress.

Theme 2: Individual Values in Diversity

Participants stated that the diversity among friends and community had made them appreciate their values and be more receptive to different cultures. Furthermore, they added that when they grasp and master the language, they can better comprehend various cultures and get more knowledge because many bits of information are in English.

'I was so excited because I can read more English books after my language has improved. I like to know about other cultures and how they lived. It makes me appreciate my own culture more. I can see that different culture when speaking their language; we all think differently.' (Lara)

The participant emphasised the significance of understanding one's values when learning English.

'I remember there's one time when I was back in my village, and my cousins teased me for showing off when I can understand the conversation in English movie. But I was trying to share with them what's the actors were talking about because it was funny. Well, I still me. I don't think I will abandon my own culture just because I can better understand English.' (Lucas)

Theme 3: Enrich Interpersonal Relationships

Participants described interpersonal relationship problems and how improving their English proficiency had benefited their interpersonal connections.

'During the international students' interaction, I had fun interacting with students from different countries. Not everyone able to fluently speak English, but we all connected with this language. We try to understand each other in simple English.' (Lara)

'I am so happy when I can speak, although not so good yet. When my lecturer understood me, and I understood him, it made me feel good. Now I can talk with him without the need to quickly run away from him.' (Lucas)

The participants stated that being able to speak in English boosted their self-image. They were delighted to communicate views with others and to have achieved the true meaning of communication through English.

Theme 4: Cognitive Adjustment

The participants also highlighted how their thoughts shifted to a more positive one as they progressed through their English journey. In addition, they discussed how they adjusted their thoughts and improved their ability to communicate verbally.

'The way I think change when I can use English in writing and speaking. I was from a national school. I seldom use English to talk because I only used either Chinese or Bahasa Malaysia. So, I think also in either Chinese or Bahasa. But now, I can adjust my thoughts to English when I need to talk in English. So it will not sound like a direct translation from Chinese.' (Lara)

'I stop thinking English is hard. I told myself that it is fun. Every time I spoke broken English, I will laugh at it. But I don't feel bad about it. I think that makes me feel more confident to continue to speak and write. I adjust my thought a bit.' (Lucas)

Theme 5: Positive Attitudes

The participants emphasised that their views shifted from negative to positive once they improved their English skills. They described being more tolerant of the English language and less critical of it.

'I used to dislike English because I was terrible at grammar. I keep on thinking about why this language is so complicated. Now, I believe that English is important because it opens doors to many opportunities. Now that I am doing my postgrad study, reading many articles somehow improves my English, and I can write my thesis. Because if you don't want to be left behind, you have to master English.' (Lara).

'Hopefully, after I graduate, I can get a job or position in multinational companies to earn more money to support my parents. To join a big company, we have to be fluent in English, oral and written. That's why I learned this language very seriously after I entered university to master it, and it is easy for me to find a good job in the future.' (Lucas)

Discussion

The findings give educators some indicators and a comprehensive picture of learners' lived personal growth experiences via English competence, which is usually ignored during the teaching and learning process. Given the importance of English as a worldwide language, knowing learners' personal development will aid them in inspiring them to master this language. Five themes emerged from the current study: the courage to take risks, individual values in diversity, enrich interpersonal relationships, cognitive adjustment, and positive attitudes.

The purpose of this study was to examine the personal growth experienced by learners throughout their path of acquiring English competence, specifically in Sarawak. It is undeniable that learners encountered difficulties acquiring the English language at the beginning of the learning process (Paramjit & Mahmor, 2014; Che Mat & Md. Yunus, 2014). However, if learners can adapt and change during the learning process, it will increase the learners' personal growth. Learners in this study stated that social perspectives, self-determination, and interpersonal interactions influenced their learning adaption. They faced multifaceted obstacles while learning the language, which resulted in their transformation and personal progress.

To grasp the essence of this worldwide language, non-native English-speaking students will face obstacles such as a lack of language competence and unsupportive social experiences, which will instil a sense of powerlessness and fear (Idrees, 2012; Yu, 2010). Participants described how they opted to self-study due to their poor English skills and saw social support (i.e. peers, instructors, family) as an important component in their learning adaption. As a result, it has given students the confidence to take chances and attempt new things and build positive attitudes.

Learners who utilise their surroundings, both at home and school, gain confidence and ease in conversing in English (Kim et al., 2010).

The learners' willingness to admit their linguistic deficiencies will motivate them to enhance their English ability (Anson & Lucas, 2003; Idrees, 2012; Che Mat & Md. Yunus, 2014). The participants in this study reported how their recognition of linguistic vulnerabilities prompted them to focus on personal experiences about their beliefs in diversity and how they were unaffected by the negative encounters. On the contrary, the recognition has enhanced their awareness of their community's customs and beliefs and its diverse ideals.

Previous research found that learners gained confidence in their ability to converse with others who speak the same language, improve their self-esteem, and decrease their sense of isolation (Anson & Lucas, 2003; Che Mat & Md. Yunus, 2014; Yu, 2010). Participants also discussed how English proficiency has helped them gain self-esteem and confidence. As a result, they found their interpersonal interactions with others who spoke the same language to be more enriching. Alrabai (2017) studied the link between learners' self-esteem and English language success. The findings show a significant relationship between students' self-esteem and their English language ability: the stronger the learners' self-esteem, the better their achievement score; conversely, the lower their self-esteem, the lower their achievement.

In addition, participants indicated their growing capacities (Rezaei & Davoudi, 2016) to be conscious of how they interpret English, which would influence their behaviour. Initially, they felt that the English language was difficult to learn and that they would never grasp it. Nevertheless, as they adjusted their beliefs about the English language, participants realised that via self-determination in developing their language competence, all of the stress became a growth process in terms of cognitive adjustment and positive attitudes.

Personal growth is a dynamic process that occurs throughout an individual's learning journey (Vitters, 2014). Participants in the current study reported numerous obstacles they experienced in acquiring the English language at the start of the learning process. However, they gradually improved their English language skills throughout the process. They later acquired cognitive and behavioural abilities to compensate for their shortcomings in language learning. This transformation brought a sense of personal growth in learners. For example, the initial feeling of missing language abilities, fear, shame, and low self-confidence represented personal growth (i.e. the courage to take risks, individual values in diversity, enrich interpersonal relationships, cognitive adjustment, and positive attitudes).

The current study has several implications. The findings, for example, help language instructors identify probable causes for learners' inability to grasp the language. English instructors can shift their attention away from exam grades and students' ability to pass exams and toward psychological factors (i.e. personal growth) that may prevent students from mastering the language. The current study may recognise these issues and urge local schools and higher education institutions to create and assure better supporting environments for disadvantaged English learners on their English language learning journey. Implementing a supportive classroom environment where students may positively encourage and learn from one another is critical for assisting students' self-determination and drive to grasp the language.

Limitations

There are limitations to the current study. The researcher interviewed just two students in this study to investigate their lived experiences of personal improvement via English competence. Therefore, it is feasible for the researcher to include additional participants to evaluate whether the findings can replicate variances in real-life experiences, obstacles, and techniques employed by various learners, which can cause changes in the results. Furthermore, learners in rural and urban areas may experience different levels of personal growth and obstacles. As a result, demographic factors such as gender, age, and educational background can further categorise the study.

Conclusion

To conclude, being one of the most remarkable languages globally, English is a language required in all vocations. The language attitude of learners is critical for mastering the language parts and communicating effectively. Speaking and writing in English can help one's personal growth in the long run. Furthermore, being able to converse with other individuals who speak the same language as the student can boost self-confidence and self-esteem. Thus, further study on this topic is required to ensure that English instructors can broaden their understanding of students' progress in increasing their language competence because each student's learning path is unique. It is beneficial to get broad insights on the personal growth experienced by learners that are applicable to improving English proficiency. This study might serve as a springboard for further research on the subject. The current study's findings revealed that learners experienced various obstacles that hindered their English learning process. Nonetheless, if learners can manage the identified obstacles, they will experience substantial personal growth throughout the process.

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