# Making Meaning of Vocabulary Learning: Seizing Opportunities at Opportune Moments

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## ABSTRACT

The ability in making meaning of learning through opportunities is seen as a pathway to autonomous learning behaviour. This study is undertaken to explore the behaviours of a group of nine learners at a tertiary institution in Malaysia to see how they utilise both receptive as well as productive vocabulary learning opportunities meaningfully beyond their English language course. The theory of constructivism appertains, as the learning activity is active, constructive, cumulative and goal-directed. The participants' journal entries of one month were perused to enquire the various aspects of their learning experiences and what they did before, during and after English language class. Weekly retrospective in depth interviews were conducted with the participants, as well as their class lecturer. The study found that these learners lacked proactive attitude in seizing learning opportunities and were poor readers of English language materials. The study also found that the extent learners take learning opportunities is not solely dependent on their language proficiency, but more than that on learner confidence and their preferred learning style of non-verbal learning, hence dispelling the widely accepted belief that high proficiency learners are more proactive in their learning pursuits. In seizing learning opportunities at opportune moments, the major stumbling blocks are lack of transfer in learning as well as limited and untapped communication opportunities with the lecturer beyond class hours. This study shows that average and low ability learners can also embrace learning opportunities meaningfully with other moderating variables, such as a confident personality and adequate risk taking initiatives.

**Keywords**: vocabulary; learning opportunities; autonomous learning; productive skills; receptive skills

## INTRODUCTION

In realising success in language learning, opportunities seized in and out of class are important indicators (Benson & Reinders, 2011) and the second language (L2) learner's role in exploring the opportunities available before and around him or her is a significant part of his or her educational experience. Language instructors do invariably remind learners to have encounters with English as often as they can as language must be used and practised in order that accuracy and fluency can be improved. In turn, learners too do not disagree on this, as awareness of the need to capitalise on learning opportunities is present among most learners. For example, in improving their lexical ability, learners can take various forms of opportunities, to enhance their ability in utilising and enriching words which they have previously learnt or explore new words. This is done through a variety of learner strategies which can be tapped as means of learning vocabulary, namely, cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies.

The ability in seeking out opportunities in learning is also a benchmark for attaining learner autonomy (Ihsan Ibaddurrahman, 2012) because it is "a necessary pre condition for success in language learning" (Lamb, 2002, p. 49). Likewise, Bennet (2006) also found that

teaching staff's perception of the key characteristics of successful learners that lead to autonomous vocabulary learning include attributes of an enquiring personality, an introspective attitude towards learning as well as the ability to find opportunities for vocabulary enhancement, especially reading for pleasure and speaking in English with friends. Therefore, any form of learning opportunity or language encounter, be it receptive or productive use of language enables learners to make meaning of their language learning experiences.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In the context of learning English as a second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (EFL), various methods and approaches to teaching and instruction have faded in and out at all levels of learning. Despite the use of various approaches, at tertiary education, students continue to face difficulties in their studies, owing to several reasons such as inability in handling academic writing conventions (Krishnan, Paul-Evanson, & Selvanayagam, 2010) as well as lexical inability (Rosemala Ismail, 2008; Ahmad Mazli Muhammad, 2007; Nambiar, 2007; Evans & Green, 2007). In the Malaysian English language teaching and learning scenario, Hassan and Fauzee Selamat (2002) found teachers' perceptions of the main reason for low English language proficiency among learners to be limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Yet, there is little evidence to show that learners are doing much to improve themselves. Similarly, Nair and Ratnam (2003) also found learners to lack the drive to be self-directed within and beyond formal learning. There are many factors which explain this state. Among these varied factors, there seems to be general agreement among educators and researchers alike of the importance of the learner variable in determining the extent of success in language learning because there is only that much a teacher can do. The learner variable is deemed an important factor because it is ultimately the learner who has to learn for himself or herself and by himself or herself (Nation, 2001). In this regard, a study which investigates the extent learners take learning opportunities and proactive learning experiences beyond formal learning hours is important in order to weigh the problem of lack of language proficiency that hamper these learners. The learning opportunities probed for the scope of enquiry are receptive learning opportunities (that is, through means of listening and reading) and productive learning opportunities (that is, through means of speaking and writing), either on their own (related to cognitive constructivism) or in a social context (related to social constructivism).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were formulated in accordance with the research objectives outlined.
1. How far do learners take productive vocabulary learning opportunities outside class?
2. How far do learners take receptive vocabulary learning opportunities outside class?
3. What are the problems faced when taking productive and receptive vocabulary learning opportunities?
4. How do learner characteristics influence vocabulary learning opportunities taken by learners?

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE TO LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

In explaining how learners tap opportunities in vocabulary learning, the theory of constructivism appertains as the learner takes the centre stage in the learning activity which is

purported to be active, constructive, cumulative and goal-directed. Constructivism dwells on the idea that knowledge is not taught but rather it is learned or constructed by the learner, hence it subscribes to the notion of learner independence of teacher intervention. Language learning does not merely involve the acquisition of objective knowledge by internalising sets of rules, structures and forms. Instead, the learner brings his or her own experiences, world knowledge, worldview and values to make meaning of the language or task at hand in a given milieu.

Constructivism embodies two major perspectives, which are cognitive constructivism and social constructivism. The crucial difference between social and cognitive constructivism is in the proximal locus of cognitive development. For cognitive constructivism, individual learners construct knowledge through their actions on the world. That means, to understand vocabulary is to invent (use) it. Cognitive constructivists, such as Piaget describe the mind in terms of the individual, restricting its domain to the individual's head.

By contrast, social constructivism claims that understanding is social in origin. The social constructivist perspective of Vygotsky describes the mind as a distributed entity that extends beyond the bounds of the body into the social environment. Learning is viewed as a social phenomenon, where human interactions provide the impetus, the stimulus, the motivation, and the information exchange, which is so vital to our total development as a social being. "This would appear to be most significant with reference to languaging, our most human characteristic." (Evangelisto, 2002).

These two strands, though different in emphasis, share common perspectives about teaching and learning and the interplay of both strands underpin how learners use learning opportunities in the class and outside class to learn vocabulary. The characteristics of a constructivist learning environment are outlined by Jonassen (1994):

- It provides multiple representations of reality.
- It avoids oversimplification and represents the complexity of the real world.
- It emphasises knowledge construction over knowledge reproduction.
- It emphasises authentic tasks in a meaningful context rather than abstract instruction out of context.
- It provides learning environments such as real-world settings or case-based learning instead of predetermined sequences of instruction.
- It encourages thoughtful reflection on experience.
- It supports collaborative, social negotiation of knowledge rather than competition among learners for recognition.

Hence, when seeking out learning opportunities in receptive (listening and reading activities) and productive (speaking and writing) learning environments, the learner is engaged in an active and constructivist learning experience. Search of related studies in the Eastern and Western learning environments on what students do outside the language class concur that employing receptive language skills are of greater importance than productive skills. For example, a study on out-of-class language learning strategies employed by a group of German learners showed that listening to the radio and reading the newspaper are the most widely used out-of-class language learning strategies (Pickard, 1996). Studies on Asian students too have yielded similar results. Hyland (2004) investigated 228 students in Hong Kong and found receptive learning methods, which he called passive strategies such as reading books and surfing the Internet to be the most important. Chinese students in New Zealand also found listening to news on the radio, independent learning at the library, reading books, watching television programmes and listening to music as their preferred modalities to learning outside class (Pearson, 2004). In West Asia, Al-Otaibi (2004) found Saudi Arabian learners to favour watching movies, listening to songs, and reading for pleasure while

Marefat and Barbari (2009) also found their Iranian participants to be inclined to reading English books, and listening to English news. Recent studies on Thai and Indonesian students carried out respectively by Chausanachoti (2009) and  Ihsan Ibaddurrahman (2012) showed that the Thais enjoyed browsing the the Internet, reading posters and watching movies while their Indonesian peers prefer listening to songs and  watching films on tv or DVD, all of which are predominantly activities of receptive language learning. A study in the Malaysian context is thus, seen necessary to probe how far Malaysian learners tap receptive and productive language learning opportunities present to them. Further, it is also necessary to enquire the problems and challenges encountered in their efforts in achieving that end to learning.

## METHODOLOGY

Data for this case study was collected through qualitative means from nine participants. There were three participants representing each proficiency level - high, average and low English language proficiency, pursuing Diploma in Business Studies course at an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. Participants' language level classification was determined by their English language scores obtained in the previous semesters at the university. The purpose for data collection was to obtain insights into the initiatives taken by learners in improving their language proficiency in general, and vocabulary skills, in particular, during and beyond formal learning. There were four males and five females, all of who were Malay Muslims and were thus, homogeneous in terms of cultural background and religious worldview. They were 19 years old and were studying in the same class. The selection of participants for the case study was based on stratified purposeful samples from the overall population of students enrolled at the said institution.

Data was collected pertaining to the participants' ongoing English language course. The participants were in their third semester of study at the university, and were pursuing preparatory English language course for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), which focussed on the four language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. The researcher made no intervention in the choice of materials and lessons designed by the lecturer, as it is the aim of this study to capture the learning processes of learners in a non-contrived and non-intervention context. The tasks, situations and class activities were also solely decided by the class lecturer. The role of the investigator was that of a non-participant, who did not interfere or influence the decisions made before, during and after lessons in any way. The lessons were either based on the textbook prescribed by the faculty or devised and innovated by the class lecturer, in-keeping with the requirements and scope of the course.

The study tapped on the role of diaries and evaluation sheets (journals) for data elicitation as they offer learners the possibility to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning as well as diagnose any problem and propose solutions. Journal writing is a useful way to explore the minds of learners and find out what they think and how they feel. Through journal writing, learners are able to synthesize their thoughts and actions and further translate them to symbolic form (Fogarty, 1995). The students wrote diaries on their learning experiences in and out of class for one month, and jotted various aspects of the learning process. These were perused to obtain insightful data on the dimensions being investigated. The journal entries of the participants were closely scrutinized to discern data relevant to the scope of enquiry. Information relevant to learning lexical items was classified based on learners' feelings, perceptions and behaviours displayed in class and out of class.

The second procedure was interview with the students and their lecturer as Patton (1990) accentuates, the very core and motive of an interview. He stresses:

> The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in or on someone else's mind. The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed. (p. 278)

The interview procedure is a common data collection method (Mackey & Gass, 2005) and is one of the most important sources of case study information (Yin, 2003). Hence, it is one of the main ways to triangulate and further enrich the data and has been employed in various studies on vocabulary learning (Bennet, 2006; Gu, 2003). Triangulation of data collection methods also ensured the validity and reliability of the information that was gathered because human instruments can be as fallible as any other forms of research instruments.

Besides journal entries, the students and their lecturer (who is the key informant in the study) were also interviewed separately, with the help of an interview guide to explore the use of receptive and productive learning opportunities in and outside class. The interview guide was used to prompt the researcher in probing the learning phenomenon, processes and variables under investigation. Altogether, four rounds of weekly retrospective interviews were conducted to enquire what the learners did in and outside class which supported the means of taking vocabulary learning opportunities. Retrospective interview is a type of self-report which requires learners to think back or retrospect on their learning. Weekly interviews were also conducted with the class lecturer to solicit information regarding the learning behaviours and habits displayed by the nine participants every week (during the six hours of class time, and outside class, if known to the lecturer). All the interviews carried out with the participants and the lecturer were audio taped and transcribed for analysis.

The data was analysed from the journal entries of the nine participants as well as the interviews with the learners and their lecturer over the period of four weeks. Findings related to the means to seizing learning opportunities were picked out for analysis. The researcher looked for patterns and practices which supported and showed learners taking learning opportunities in learning lexical items in both receptive and productive ways. Patterns which emerged from the data were classified systematically and objectively into receptive and productive learning opportunities. When analysing interview data, the researcher looked for phrases as well as key words that fitted the definition of the parameters being investigated, for example, "I accessed the Internet to obtain further information on ……", "I asked my teacher the meaning of …." or "I didn't go through my work …" According to Boyatzis (1998, cited in Nadzrah Abu Bakar, 2007, p. 39), "thematic analysis enables scholars, observers, or practitioners to use a wide variety of types of information in a systematic manner that increases their accuracy or sensitivity in understanding and interpreting observations about people, events, situations, and organizations."

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### HOW FAR DO LEARNERS TAKE PRODUCTIVE VOCABULARY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE CLASS?

According to the lecturer, learners are frequently reminded to use English as often as they can. Yet, according to her, there is little evidence to show they are doing much to improve themselves. Eight out of the nine participants (high, average and low ability learners) admitted that they do not speak English widely with their friends and peers. A few (generally, average ability learners) do try using English in daily conversations and intermittently with roommates and friends at the hostel, particularly in sharing jokes. However, their efforts are not long-lasting, hence, limited opportunity to use words learnt. It seems that the classroom is

the predominant place for utilising (speaking or writing) and constructing English, and means of interactive communication beyond class hours are obviously lacking. To illustrate the limited interactive communication beyond class hours, one average ability learner shared an interesting method of revising and reinforcing words learnt, that is by speaking to herself introspectively so as not to forget these words. The participant, a female said she would read aloud the sentence learnt in class (to herself) several times, such as by memorising the word, "ultimatum" and "recapitulate." This was her usual practice as there was limited opportunity to interact with peers beyond class hours.

It seems that peer interaction, which is a key variable in ensuring success to the dynamics of learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) is not effectively tapped on. This is congruent with Hyland (2004) who found hindrance to speaking outside class as a result of fear of negative judgments, owing to various social and political factors. Other Malaysian studies which found similar results were by Lee (2001; 2003; 2005; 2006, cited in Lee, S. K., Lee, K. S., Wong & Azizah Ya'acob 2010) which showed learners who speak English widely outside class to be labeled as being Westernized or *"mat salleh celup"* (Lee, et. al, 2010, p. 98).

Among all the participants, only one high ability male learner is noted to be proactive enough in his approach to experimenting with words learnt in class. As a social constructivist, he is seen to communicate widely with friends in English, especially with his best friend and even considers himself lucky to have a roommate who is not proficient in the language, so, he is constantly able to coach him through oral communication. This is in keeping with the findings obtained by Krause (2007) who found learners who engage in peer interaction more frequently to derive greater satisfaction in learning and with academic progress. Besides that, this learner also shares new proverbs learnt by sending text messages to friends. As he puts it, "We should think in English and speak in English" because "English is not only in the class, English is everywhere. I want people around us to speak in English … but everybody is like, shocked with me." He expressed dissatisfaction at the limited opportunities for practising English with friends at this institution as it not widely spoken by staff and learners. The state of "shocked with me" can be understood by corroborating Lee's (2001; 2003; 2005; 2006, cited in Lee, Hazita Azman & Koo, 2010) study which found hostility towards English in certain contexts amongst the Malays. Lee found her participants, a group of tertiary learners to perceive English speaking individuals to be showing off, boastful, having colonial piety, and were even seen as traitors or betrayers of the Malay cultural identity and the Malay language. With negative perceptions, the learners are unable to stride ahead and make meaningful progress as social constructivist of the English language.

**HOW FAR DO LEARNERS TAKE RECEPTIVE VOCABULARY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE CLASS?**

There were several means of receptive learning to improve English language in general and lexical competence in particular, such as reading, listening, surfing Internet sources and watching television. Some means of receptive learning opportunities for lexical learning were listening to songs on MP3 and the computer radio (particularly for male participants), watching English movies, television programmes and reading entertainment magazines. As for television, the students reported watching television only during semester breaks as only a single television unit is provided in each hostel, catering to more than 200 students.

One of the major drawbacks to receptive learning means was found to be poor reading habits beyond the allocated English class time, congruent with the findings by Chong and Lai (2007, cited in Chong & Renganathan, 2008; Subbiah, Sita Raman & Jawahil, 2004). Pandian (2000, cited in Giridharan & Conlan, 2003, p. 5) found 80.1% of Malaysian university

learners to be reluctant readers of English materials. Rai, Krishnasamy, & Nair (2003) also found learners at a Malaysian institution of higher learning to hardly spend an hour a day reading English materials. Many learners fail to realise that as a component of literacy, "reading is a valuable commodity, providing access to power and enlightenment" (Kern, 2000, p. 24). Hence, failure to read on a regular basis has resulted in weak vocabulary among learners as they are exposed to fewer words (Manveet Kaur, 2002).

The participants admitted to rarely ever reading anything beyond the stipulated coursework materials. English language materials such as the newspaper are a no-no; only few ever read the English newspaper, while the others say they are too busy to read. Even though The Student Affairs at Unithas had taken the initiative of providing free English newspaper (*The Star*) for the learners' reading pleasure, alas the learners concede that they are never able to obtain the paper as the number of papers available for daily circulation is limited and are often taken up before 8 am, hence, lack of initiative on the part of learners to seize the opportunity meaningfully.

Another reason why the English newspaper is not a preferred source of learning is because of the presence of many difficult words, making the learners feeling compelled to continuously refer to the dictionary and as a result, cause boredom. As conceded by one low language ability male participant, *"kadang-kadang rasa macam nak give up aje, kadang-kadang rasa enjoy, kadang-kadang rasa benci"* (Translation: Sometimes, I feel like giving up, sometimes I feel enjoyable, sometimes I hate it). With regard to Comprehensible Input Hypothesis, optimum level of input complexity which suits the learner's cognition is important in order to ensure acquisition (Krashen, 1985). In other words, the reading material should be just beyond the learner's current level of comprehension and cognition. In vocabulary learning, incidental learning of words through reading or undirected reading for pleasure (such as the newspaper) is an effective way of ensuring lexical learning. However, when the input is incomprehensible and the expressions encountered are difficult for the learner, acquisition does not take place. As such, we find cases as one participant, who admitted to buying the English newspaper only once a semester and prefers to read the Malay newspaper all the time.

The participants also do not go to the library to read the newspaper or borrow English storybooks, due to alleged busy work schedule and long class hours. Reading books and novels are not prevalent among most participants, especially the low language ability learners. One high ability female learner said she does so only during the holidays and enjoys reading children story books. A few participants shared that they had never read an English novel before because "… English novels or books - they use difficult words, and we have to find the meaning in the dictionary." Only two participants (one with high ability and one with an average ability) are members of the public library in their respective hometowns; one admitted to using the facility solely for the purpose of surfing the Internet and printing materials. However, it is good to note that some learners who are risk takers such as one average ability learner, continue to read despite encountering difficulties in lexical comprehension: "… even I don't know the word, but I love to reading. Even I don't know the word, I don't care … I always read because I just want to make my tongue fluent with the words."

A learner who takes such initiative and is proactive in taking responsibility of learning independently of a teacher is willing to take a certain amount of risk. This display of interest enables the learner to seize opportunities in learning, regardless of his / her linguistic limitations, and is able to create successful learning experiences. Giang (2010) found the Internet as the leading source (86%) for learners to learn vocabulary. As Internet access is wide and borderless, it is easily available anywhere and at any time of day. Many methods of vocabulary learning are available from the cyber world, such as reading materials such as

newspapers, magazines, books, listening to songs and watching videos. However, for the participants of the case study, the Internet is used to complete assignments of play games in their free time. Only on rare occasions do they surf online news websites.

## PROBLEMS FACED WHEN TAKING PRODUCTIVE AND RECEPTIVE VOCABULARY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

As the discussion in the preceding section shows, the productive and receptive learning opportunities taken by learners are not extensive. Several reasons and problems were cited for their inability in using learning opportunities meaningfully.

### LACK OF TRANSFER IN LEARNING

The main problem related to limited learning opportunities is diagnosed to be lack of transfer in learning lexical items. This was well reflected by the lecturer after a lesson on inflected verbs:

> … two days ago I taught them to use the simple past tense. All exercises were completed correctly. If tomorrow I ask them to write me an essay about something that had happened in the past, more often than not, they are going to forget everything I had taught them. This is a common complaint from teachers … the majority may learn, use and memorise a few new words, as just as quickly forget them or 'forget to see' them.

According to the lecturer, sometimes, in class, the learners are just unable to find the word they need. These simple words seem so elusive even though they can be found in basic words list; the ones introduced while they were in the primary school or at the lower secondary level. For most learners, speaking English is found to be challenging because "it's very difficult. When you speak English, have to translate first in my brain, only then I can speak. It's quite late compared to speak Malay." The conscious cognitive effort of encoding, processing translating and producing language is deemed challenging for learners. According to the lecturer, filling in the blanks exercises are simple with ninety percent of the learners answering them correctly. However, in tests or exercises where learners actually have to produce something out of almost nothing (except for some short notes that are given earlier) the lecturer notices that very few of the words are used or even used correctly, for example, the word "impose". For example, when writing a letter on the topic already previously discussed, the new words did not seem to have registered in their minds. Many words that they should have retained were not. In expressing the necessity of "imposing a curfew", most participants lacked collocation knowledge and wrote "make a curfew" instead. It was observed that most learners lapsed back into their old and fossilized ways. The lecturer shared during the interview that in spite of repeating and explaining the meaning of a word, few can actually remember the new words learnt in the unit. Another example is when discussing a text on Parkinson's disease, the word "tremor" cropped up again. Only two learners in the class could remember that the item had been learnt in an earlier text on earthquakes and tsunamis. Further, even though some participants said that they had learnt the word "ultimatum", during the personal interview, they were unable to explain its meaning. Hence, it was only a case of being acquainted with the word, without total comprehension and complete word knowledge. This is because shallow processing of vocabulary input like oral rehearsal, matching or cloze exercises does not lead to long-term retention of words (Ellis, 1995). When processing information, the words are only stored in learners' working memory (short term memory), which is only a temporary site of learning. Upon storing and saving the input, learners are unable to retrieve or activate their memory as

the input had not successfully reached the permanent storage stage of long term memory. Without deeper level or processing or deep semantic association with the input, long term acquisition does not occur effectively and learners would forget quickly, even words learnt after only two weeks.

Similarly, in terms of productive skill of speaking, the lecturer remarked that: "Even if (and when) learners do make an effort to speak English with each other, words that have been learnt in class like "impose", "curb", "bizarre", "boon", "ingenious", and "venture" would not make their way into their conversations". Without adequate activation of these words, there is no successful transfer of learning and they are not reinforced as known vocabulary items. An example to illustrate this is a low ability female participant was probed as to why she could not retain or recall any of the vocabulary items learnt within the week - she simply shrugged and said, "I couldn't remember", without any real reason. The researcher further probed the motive(s) for this, and attributed it to attitudinal cause. This is because the participant did not object to the words as irrelevant to her subject major, or for her preparation for the MUET, but rather these words are simply not activated with conscious effort on the part of learners.

Lack of transfer is also noted in incorrect use of parts of speech, as nouns and adjectives are used interchangeably. According to the lecturer, learners are also careless on the test and are simply not conscious when speaking or writing. Even though some participants opted to memorise the words and tried to reactivate them, the results have been unsuccessful. The participants expressed frustrations such as, "… when I try to remember in the exam, I can't coz I lost the word I *hafal* (translation: memorised) … I will find the word I do not understand and then I try to improve, but the result is not what I did … I can't recall the words I learn … I always use the same word, that makes me feel become *geram"* (translation: frustrated). Similarly, one high ability learner admitted to being able to memorise about 10-15 meanings a day, but would forget within three days. However, when he encounters the same word, it becomes familiar and he may be able to use contextual clues but total comprehension would require more cognitive effort.

## LEARNER-LECTURER COMMUNICATION OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

The learners also admit to not seeking any consultation with their English language lecturer outside class hours and are contented with the six-hour input every week. During the interviews with the lecturer, it was enquired if any of these participants had consulted her at any point in learning throughout the weeks, to which she answered, "no". The lecturer's file of teaching portfolio clearly states, "I make myself available outside the classroom. All my learners have my contact number", yet the learners fail to capitalise on the privilege reserved for them in the lecturer's timetable. None has seen the lecturer for further consultation and this has been a trend carried on from Part One of their university life, reflecting low sense of agency in their central role as learners and as the main stakeholders in the process of learning. The lecturer noted only one participant to show initiative of communicating with her via the phone and text messaging. According to two low ability participants, their relationship with lecturers at university is not as close as it was with their school teachers. Hence, they seldom go up to lecturers after class hours. The only time the learners actually seek the lecturers is at end-semester period, for the purpose of knowing their ongoing assessment marks, or requesting further information pertaining to the final examination papers. Similarly, in another institution of higher learning in Malaysia, Lee, et al. (2010) also found that undergraduates rarely seek consultation with their lecturers when doing assignments or projects.

### HOW DO LEARNER CHARACTERISTICS INFLUENCE VOCABULARY LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES TAKEN BY LEARNERS?

#### HIGH PROFICIENCY LEARNERS

The lecturer reflected that the high language ability learners "are good in the sense that they do read a bit more than the average students, can and are willing to express their views freely in class and are confident when responding orally to questions put forward" by the lecturer. They are able to empower themselves with opportunities to use vocabulary receptively and productively to help them increase fluency, both as cognitive and social constructivists. This is because "proficient students have a better tool, that is, knowledge of the language, for their critical judgments, reflection and evaluation" (Giang, 2010, p. 29). The lecturer shared her observation of these learners:

> … [they] can express themselves without having to grope for 'the word' when speaking. Not using the exact or most suitable word is usual, but this does not hinder them, and they don't stop in the middle of a sentence because they can't find the right words whereas the weaker students have the tendency to discontinue without completing their sentences, and just assume that everyone has understood.

These high language proficiency learners have the ability to express themselves without having to search helplessly for the right lexis when speaking. No doubt they do not always use the correct or most suitable word, but they do not stop in the middle of a sentence trying to think of just the right words. They do not lose their composure when they get stuck in the middle of a sentence. These learners simply begin the sentence again, rephrasing it and then continue to complete their explanation. The lecturer's classroom observations are similar to the opinions expressed by the high ability learners; both parties concur that they (high ability learners) face little problem expressing their views in and outside class. They willingly voice them and are not put off even when their answers are wrong. They do not mind being corrected as they see it as an opportunity in learning. They are able to explain their views and can argue reasonably well to defend them. Their less than perfect grammar does not hamper their efforts. For example, one high ability learner is noted to be active in class for he is not intimidated to speak up to voice his opinions. The lecturer finds him to be "the most cooperative" and responsive in class who displays interest and enthusiasm by sitting in front. An illustration of his high degree of confidence in seizing the opportunity to experiment with vocabulary use was when discussing the viability of euthanasia to reduce a family's financial burden. His confident use of language makes him comfortable expressing his ideas and points of view. He is observed to thoroughly enjoy discussion of various topics. Being well-read, he will not hesitate to enquire or ask questions if he is in doubt about anything. Similarly, another high ability male learner, too, shares similar traits and is an active participant in class, confident (very sure of himself), has good general knowledge and admits to not feeling shy to speak English. On the contrary, the other high ability student, a female is quieter (and describes herself as shy), nevertheless, was able to express herself confidently when asked for opinions.

#### LOW PROFICIENCY LEARNERS

On the other hand, the lecturer noted that when a weak learner is trying to search for the right lexis to express opinions, he or she will tend to discontinue without completing the sentence, shrug shoulders, and may say, "Err, I don't know" or just smile back saying, "You know ...", assuming (or hoping) that everyone has understood his or her intended meaning. During

speaking activities, a lot of difference is observed in the way high ability learners and low ability learners experiment with language use in general, and vocabulary use, in particular. According to the lecturer, two stark scenarios emerge when weak learners are part of a group. The first scenario is when the group is made up of mostly weak learners (low ability participants in the case study). In this scenario, one weak ability learner who has started speaking would often begin talking and just stop, leaving her sentence 'hanging'. The other group members would just smile, and nod as if they have understood and agree with her 'points'. Then, someone else would take off from there and the group would continue with their discussion. In this case, the weak learners feel more relaxed and non-intimidated. Although they stop midway in the speaking exercise, the support received from peers helps in getting the group discussion through. The second scenario is when an average or weak participant is part of a group of good learners. When the weaker learner stops or has difficulty continuing, the others would probe and prompt him or her for elaboration and further explanation by asking questions. In one case, when the lecturer noticed two learners having a really good discussion, upon asking, she discovered that it was actually supposed to be another average learner's turn to speak individually. When questioned further, it was found that the average learner was not able to come up with the point(s) and did not know how to elaborate. Therefore, her group members tried to help by asking each other questions and responding, hoping that she would join in. This however, did not happen. In response, the participant admitted during the interview that she would only speak when asked by her friends, and would never readily contribute any idea(s). According to the lecturer, the possibility might be that the weaker learners feel less at ease when expressing their views with more vocal members in their groups. They may feel shy or unsure of themselves or perhaps, they feel it is better to just keep quiet than to open their mouths to speak and appear to "look stupid" in front of the better ones. Are they intimidated by the better ones or are they actually more afraid of what others may say about them when giving 'wrong' answers'?

The low ability learners also admitted that their rather limited vocabulary makes communicating in English a chore, one that they would rather avoid if possible. An average ability student commented in Malay that, *"… fikir saya tahu apa nak cakap tapi nak cakap tu … speechless"* (Translation: "…think I know what to speak but when I speak … [I am] speechless") and would speak only when completely sure of what to say. As such, in completing the learning cycle when exploiting vocabulary input, the lecturer believes there is a strong relationship between vocabulary levels and comprehension because "having a wide vocabulary is important in any language class. It contributes to higher achievement of the learners in their course." Therefore, a learner's weak vocabulary will result in his or her inability to perform well in class activities as well as examinations; it is frustrating both for the learners as well as their lecturer when the learners do not have wide vocabulary.

**LEARNER CONFIDENCE**

Besides language proficiency, learners' confidence is also a key variable that influences learners' decisions in taking vocabulary learning opportunities. The lecturer feels that the learners perceive speaking in class as a risk, owing to their confidence level. As she reflected:

> So much is at stake; they could be laughed at, ridiculed or be made to feel
> and look stupid in front of the rest, some of whom they perceive to be better.
> The fact that the class is a mixed-ability one does not help. The weaker
> students are made to feel self-conscious of their shortcomings.

Two of the three participants who are categorised as weak do not contribute much during class discussions and are rather passive during lessons. The male learner, though not really a

quiet person (at other times) is reticent during English lessons and has difficulty expressing himself, even during group discussions due to limited vocabulary. During one of the role plays, he only contributed two or three sentences. The lecturer noted that his "vocab is not good enough for Part III [that is, semester three]." The only English phrase that he often utters is, "Oh, man!" possibly out of frustration for his frequent mid-sentence breakdowns.

As such, could lack of confidence be one of the reasons for the lack of interest in using the opportunities presented in class to use language in general, and vocabulary items, in particular? Weak learners are not particularly interested, nor able to set up conditions (such as speaking situations) that can lead to successful learning of vocabulary. This is one of the reasons why many weak learners are not willing to answer or speak in front of the rest. At times, when putting forward a question, sometimes individual learners are heard responding but it is sometimes not possible for the lecturer to know where the response comes from. If the lecturer knows the source of the response, she would ask the learner to repeat the answer. The better ability learners usually would do so willingly. Conversely, a weak learner when asked to do the same would simply shake his or her head or say nothing and look away.

On one occasion, the lecturer was a little disturbed to find one or two learners - one average ability learner and another low ability learner refusing to speak during activities among their own groups of friends. They chose not to speak when it was their turn to do so. How they were able to remain very quiet when their friends were having a heated discussion was perplexing. When quizzed, the learners (two of them, low ability learners) contended that they would rather remain silent (yet, claimed that learning occurred) as they were not able to express themselves due to limited lexical ability.

This is clearly a vicious cycle - a double-edged sword, as it were; the learners do not participate because they are weak and they are weak because they do not participate. Although they contend to be "learning" while the others actively participate, it does not come across to the lecturer nor is it reflected in their course progress. They looked satisfied just to watch and listen to the others. It is really hard to read what is on the mind of some learners. Do they feel that a particular activity is just a waste of time or have they actually given up on themselves as learners of the English language?

## LEARNING STYLE

The findings suggest that learners' participation and confidence in using vocabulary items are related to their proficiency levels. This is particularly true in the case of high ability and low ability learners. However, it is not entirely the case for all the participants, as the observable behaviors of some participants show. A few participants of the case study (high, average and low ability) seem completely at odd with this hypothesis, hence, proof that proficiency level is not the only indicator of confidence in learning and seizing opportunities in experimenting with lexical items. It was found that that the individual's personality and non-verbal learning style are other contributors to learning. What the lecturer observed and what some participants contend are two different perspectives to learning. Some of the participants' admissions prove that observable signals and mental readiness do not always converge to the same conclusion.

Though some learners are perceived to be somewhat disengaged in lessons (as observed by the lecturer), they seize opportunities in learning lexical items in non-vocal and more subdued ways (for example, taking down extensive notes in the handouts, learning by listening to others in the group, and from peer tutoring). For example, one average ability female learner constantly displays a reserved disposition and does not say much, even during individual presentations and when encouraged by group members. She is nevertheless, noted to be diligent in her studies and completes all work given (such as assignments), also jots

notes conscientiously in her handouts, such as writing equivalent vocabulary terms in English and Malay as well as contends to learning many new vocabulary terms in her daily journal entries. In her journal, she asserted that "learning [the English language course] is quite interesting, so that makes me or that is one of the reason for me to not excuse the class."

The researcher further probed the reasons for this participant's reticence in class and found that she admitted to be entirely engaged in learning, but would rather keep quiet and learn from her more vocal peers. Another high ability female learner is also admittedly reserved and does not volunteer responses.  She appears more of an introvert and will respond only when called upon. She admits:

> I like the idea of group presentation but I don't like to speak in front, because I'm not the type of person who's vocal, like to step up. I enjoy watching people speaking in front, but I like just watching, not me speaking.

Hence, it does not make her less confident and less autonomous in learning lexical items. In this case, the lecturer did note that she is not shy; she has a naturally quiet disposition but shines in small group activities.  During group discussions, she is able to keep the discussion going and is very helpful towards her friends by prompting them and not monopolising the discussion. For example, on one occasion, she played a very effective role of an angry mother demanding to see her child's teacher and rose to the occasion, with effective language use. On the other hand, three other average and low ability learners are yet, confident, vocal, attentive and active participants in class. One of the average ability female learner says:

> I'm not quite good in this but I just want to speak. I don't care about even I'm correct or not, I just want to deliver what I want to say … even I know I have my grammar mistake or the sentence hard to understand if I speak English, but I just say what I want to say.

Another average ability male, showed good participation in role play, probably because the script was prepared. On other occasions, he seems reluctant and quiet during group discussions, but would respond when called upon. The lecturer explained in the interview that he would be cooperative and respond, "whether it's right or wrong, it doesn't matter - he's ok." Similarly, another weak ability female learner, has a lot of ideas to contribute and would strive to express herself as effectively as possible, despite her language limitations, even if she needs to code-switch to the Malay language. Hence, it shows that language ability affects learners' confidence to a certain extent but does not completely reflect all learners' engagement in class and how they seize opportunities to reinforce lexical items.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study shows that in general, productive and receptive vocabulary learning opportunities are not fully utilised by learners, and are far from meeting the satisfaction of their lecturer. Several problems hamper these efforts, namely lack of transfer in learning as well as lack of initiative in seeking out lecturer's help beyond class hours.

In all aspects of seizing vocabulary-learning opportunities, there is positive correlation between learners' proficiency levels and the degree of opportunities taken in learning lexical items, hence autonomy is displayed in learning. This is because learners of different proficiency levels would display different means to exploit the same input material, based on their language capabilities. Thus, language proficiency is invariably a reliable determinant of learners' efforts in learning vocabulary - a pertinent point in the current grain of literature which shows that high ability language learners are more autonomous than less proficient learners. Learner's language proficiency, besides contributing to his or her

confidence in language learning forms the basis for fostering learner autonomy (see Giang, 2010; Brown, 2000). This study also shows that learners who display more positive traits learn proactively and effectively, confirming findings of many other empirical investigations which have proven that learner autonomy is the hallmark to effective language learning and improved language ability (Guo & Zhang, n.d.; Sidhu, Sarjit & Chan, 2011; Sidhu, 2009; Benson, 2007, 2001, Aase, 2003, Aoki, 2003, Oxford, 1990, cited in Sidhu, Sarjit & Chan, 2011). In other words, good learners beget good attitudes. Proficient language learners are more proactive than less proficient ones.

However, the case study data of this study has also proven that language proficiency is not the only indicator of successfully taking language learning opportunities in general, and vocabulary learning opportunities, in particular. There are also other contributing factors and equally important determinants when approaching vocabulary learning namely, learner confidence and risk taking abilities. The case study participants are proof that average or low ability learners who are willing to take risks and display high confidence levels are equally engaged in learning and do make efforts to regulate their learning processes. On the other hand, being quiet or less vocal does not indicate that a learner is less engaged in learning. Thus, it is established that the extent learners take learning opportunities cannot be discerned from the observable learning behaviours of being quiet or other classroom disposition displayed which may suggest that the learner is disengaged. In effect, learners are equally engaged and involved in the process of learning vocabulary.

Hence, it is concluded that learners do not seize language learning opportunities based solely on learners' language proficiency, but more than that, on learners' confidence levels because "it is unlikely a student with poor academic confidence would easily become an autonomous learner" (Giang, 2010, p. 28). In addition, personality traits, such as risk taking ability and innate interest in learning lexical items are also other variables of weightage.

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