MALAYSIAN STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR INTERACTIONS IN UK SEMINARS

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Coming from different social and academic cultures, students may exhibit perceptions which are in contrast to the convention of the targeted culture. Hence, this study aims to explore how first-year Malaysian students perceive their interactions in UK seminars.

Methodology: Employing qualitative research method, nine Malaysian students were chosen based on two criteria: they have to be first-year students and registered in content modules in UK university. The data were collected from interview and focus group discussion, and the audio-recordings were transcribed and analysed utilising thematic analysis.

Findings: The participants of this study perceive their interactions differently. Semek, Enot, Fatin, Ammar, Ming and Izlin mentioned that they responded during seminar discussion if they were nominated by the tutor and most agreed that they did not ask questions because information was provided to them or they could ask the tutor or their friends after the seminar. Fatin however disagreed and asserted that students should ask questions if they did not understand the academic content well. Qaisara, Puspa and Semek also shared that their lack of English language proficiency influenced their lack of contribution which was not the case for Fatin and Ming. Being marginalised as an international
student was one of the reasons Semek did not contribute to the seminar discussions in contrast to Qaisara who felt the need to contribute.

Contributions: The findings of this study suggest that academic institutions should be flexible in encouraging students to be engaged in seminars as coming from different educational background, these students may require additional help to socialise in academic setting and consequently become expert members.

Keywords: Malaysian students, students’ perceptions, students’ interactions, UK seminars, verbal interactions.


1.0 INTRODUCTION
Students need to be able to discuss their respective discipline-specific content academically. Ho (2011) argues that small group discussions help students to socialise into their discipline-specific discourse and practices. However, coming from different social and academic cultures, where conventions might be different, students may face different challenges in socialising academically in seminars. This is similar to what McEwan (2013) and Kingston and Forland (2008) argue: students may have problems adjusting academically when coming from different academic cultures due to the different expectations.

The three national documents; National Education Philosophy (NEP), Malaysian Education Blueprint (MEB) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015), and School-Based Curriculum English Language (SBELC) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2016) mention the need to communicate and be proficient not only in the Malay language, but also in the English language. These three documents require Malaysian students to speak in the classroom and have the proficiency and competence to use the English language inside and outside of the classroom. Although this is the mission statement of the three documents, the reality in Malaysia is different as research found that Malaysian students are not speaking or contributing to classroom discussions (Mustapha, Nik Abd Rahman, & Md. Yunus, 2010a, 2010b; Mustapha & Nik Abd Rahman, 2011; Abdullah, Abu Bakar, & Mahbob, 2012). These studies report the reality of how Malaysian students interact: they are mostly considered as passive students. Unpleasant experiences, such as being mocked by friends or being called a show-off
(Rajadurai, 2010; Abdullah & Wong, 2006; Lee, 2003a) encountered when using the English language in the classroom, may have influenced these students’ lack of motivation to contribute to class discussion. Malaysian undergraduate students perceive the use of English in certain circumstances as creating hostility, separation and segregation, especially among own ethnicities (Lee, 2003b). In fact, these students’ experiences reveal that conformity and acceptance are improved when they do not use the English language (Lee, 2003b).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Novices’ practical engagement with others could be better understood by looking at the social structuring and cultural interpretations of certain linguistic forms, practices, or ideologies (Duranti, Ochs, & Schieffelin, 2012). Within the academic setting, these practical engagements can be analysed by utilising academic discourse socialisation. Academic discourse socialisation is defined as the ability that members develop in order to take part in a new discourse community due to the interactions that occur between expert and novice members of the community and cognitive experiences (Duff, 2007). In other words, it is fundamental that newcomers develop this ability if they would like to be acknowledged or accepted. Similar to language socialisation, which is defined as a lifelong learning process that occurs in any communities within a range of activities (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2008; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), academic discourse socialisation occurs in co-constructed interactions in academic settings (Morita, 2004). For instance, how language is used within a society to interact among the members can be analysed by investigating academic discourse socialisation. It is also considered to be a dynamic process which is socially positioned and involves contexts that are multimodal, in multiple languages and rich in different types of texts (Duff, 2010). The socialisation process is embedded in and transmitted through language and thus, individuals need to master the language to gain full membership of the target community (Morita, 2000). In short, novices are socialised into the practice of linguistic forms and culture of a particular group of interest or a Community of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998). In academic discourse socialisation, the process of socialisation occurs in academic settings. As for this study, Malaysian students’ engagement in seminars is an example of academic discourse socialisation where the engagement occurred for academic purposes while they discuss academic content in academic setting.

Academic discourse socialisation is informed by Vygotsky’s (1978) assertion that social context is fundamental in a learning development. This means academic discourse socialisation exemplifies one of the sociocultural theory principles; internalisation process
where other people’s characteristics, beliefs, feelings, and attitudes are assimilated unconsciously by individuals (Vygotsky, 1978). Another sociocultural theory principle embedded in academic discourse socialisation is the concept of scaffolding that emphasises the role of expert members (e.g. teachers) in supporting the development of novices by providing structured support for the novices to reach the next stage of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding is crucial in academic discourse socialisation because the expert members of a community need to guide and support the novices in ensuring a successful socialisation in the academic setting. As the internalisation process results from interaction, providing individuals with interaction opportunities is necessary. Eventually, a person who has achieved successful academic socialisation enjoys increased and improved participation, is able to socially play different roles, and has developed expertise and gained the position of expert member in a community (Morita & Kobayashi, 2008). This can be achieved by having novice members engage in a variety of language mediated activities (Duff, 2002).

2.1 Social Interactions

One of the main elements of academic discourse socialisation is the socialisation process that occurs in an academic context. In other words it is the social interactions which are pragmatically connected (Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002). Members of the community need to master the linguistic knowledge and internalise the functions and contexts of the language. It is important in cultivating not only first and additional language communicative competence but also knowledge of the target community’s values, practices, identities, and ideologies. For instance, certain skills such as joking are taken for granted by experts, but they are challenging for novices. It is important for novices to learn and master these activities and skills (Schegloff, 1986). Within the academic seminars observed, the Malaysian students in the UK (MSUK) were considered as novices and were expected to have social interactions with others in the seminar: tutors and classmates. The MSUK were considered as novices as they were in their first year in UK higher education institutions coming from Malaysia education system. They were also not familiar with the convention of the modules they took. The expert members of the community can assist by implicitly or explicitly guiding the novices in thinking, feeling, and acting according to the values, norms, practices, ideologies, and traditions of the target community. Novice members might also inform the expert members of their communication and social needs, and the state of their existing competency (Jacoby & Gonzalez, 1991) as they may have different levels of competencies.
2.2 Members of the Community

Members of the community in which the language is spoken, either the expert members or novices are central to the socialisation process (Duranti et al., 2012). The expert members are those who are more proficient in the language and have the desire to help novices to also become expert members of the community (Duranti et al., 2012). They are more knowledgeable in the values, ideologies, and practices associated with the community and its language. Typically, teachers, tutors, and peers are examples of expert members whose proficiency level may vary extensively (Duranti et al., 2012). Due to the prevailing focus on how experts help in the socialisation process of the novice members, He (2003) argues that in the process of socialisation, novice members who are passive are presumed to be the recipients of the socialisation. The expert members may guide the novices to become more knowledgeable but this depends on their wishing to become members of the community. Typically, examples of novices are learners, who are also members of the community, involved with the process of academic socialisation and have different levels of agency and some of them may experience personal changes.

It is proposed that the expert members may also learn from novices (Duff, 2007) despite the competent members being the ones who usually help to support and facilitate the socialisation process of the novices (Morita, 2000; Zappa-Hollman, 2007). The expert members could learn, restructure their norms, and be adapted into the beliefs, values, ideologies, and practices of the novices’ culture as interactions occur. This echoes what Pontecorvo, Fasulo, and Sterponi (2001) propose: language socialisation is an interactive process where the members involved mutually guide each other. Similarly, Duff (2007, p. 311) posits that language socialisation is “bi-directional”. For instance, parents and children in a family help each other to understand each other’s culture and generation with the role to initiate this process belonging to the parents or children interchangeably. With the rapid change in technology nowadays, community experts are not necessarily older people and novices are not necessarily younger people (Duranti et al., 2012).

Coming from various personal and academic backgrounds, each student may have different levels of understanding and experience regarding the academic content. Under this circumstance, the academic community may have students who are more expert and competent than others. This is also applicable to the tutors and lecturers. They could be considered as expert members who help to support the new students in growing accustomed to the new academic community. The experts explicitly display the values and practices of the academic community which are hidden and unspoken to the novice members (Duff, 2007, 2010).
expert members are also encouraged to provide the new members with the necessary linguistic knowledge, skills, guidance, and occasions for these new members to take part in. By observing tutors or students who are more proficient in the classroom, novice students might gradually participate more actively in speech activities, such as class discussions, where they become more proficient in the linguistic conventions and cultural norms and practices (Duff, 1996; Morita, 2000). This echoes Duff’s (2010) suggestion that it is common for the novice members to deliberately analyse, borrow, and imitate others’ interaction styles to successfully participate in academic speech activities, provided that that is their academic goal. It is argued that with time, experience, and some explicit or implicit mentoring by the expert members, novices will eventually be able to participate and socialise like proficient members of the community (Duff, 2002). This however depends on whether their socialisation goal is to be acknowledged by the members of the target community.

In the present study, Malaysian students who had just started their bachelor’s degree were the novices while the tutors and the home students were the expert members. In academic institutions, academic discourse socialisation involves not only current students and academicians, but also new students due to the fact that it is a socialisation process the students have to undergo when they first enter any academic institution (Duff, 2010). These new students are socialised into a new academic community to become competent members when participating in both written and oral academic discourse (Duff, 2010). Even though these newcomers might have the same home language as that of the academic institution, they may come from different places with different personal and academic backgrounds, knowledge, and experience (Duff, 2010). Some new students even come with different ranges of linguistic knowledge and cultural backgrounds (Morita, 2000). Some other factors might affect academic discourse socialisation such as the students’ personal and academic background namely, their linguistic background or their previous learning experiences (Ho, 2011). As these factors vary from one student to another, the challenges faced are also individually distinctive (Morita, 2000). This suggests that the students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds are two of the important characteristics to be identified and acknowledged when discussing academic discourse socialisation. Another important characteristic of the students involved in the academic socialisation process is the way these students and their background are viewed by themselves and other members of the community such as peers, tutors and lecturers (Duff, 2010). They may be perceived to be worthy, capable, and legitimate insiders and individuals who have the potential to gain full membership of the academic community or otherwise. The
perceptions they have of themselves and the perceptions others have of them could affect their socialisation experience.

2.3 Language

Another important element of academic discourse socialisation is the language that is used in academic settings such as the classrooms and all the norms related to it (Duff, 2010). Language is a fundamental element of the language socialisation process as it helps in mediating the cultural and communicative knowledge between the experts and novices (Garrett & Baquedano-Lopez, 2002). This is originally mentioned by Mandelbaum (1958); language is perceived as the optimal means to socialise. Schieffelin and Ochs (1986) take a similar position and suggest that socialisation could be achieved through language use and socialisation is one of the means to use the language. Novices not only learn the language and the ability to correctly use the language when socialising in the new community but they also learn other information such as the culture practices, values, non-linguistic content, and ideologies practised by the target community (Ochs, 1986). As a result of the observation and socialisation, novices become fluent in using the language and eventually become the expert community members (Duranti et al., 2012). University students are socialised by their lecturers, tutors or peers in academic settings using the language (Kibler, Salerno, & Palacios, 2014). This shows the importance of choosing a suitable medium of instruction, thus, any decision pertaining to it needs to be thoroughly deliberated by important stakeholders such as the relevant government ministry.

Due to the distinct features of spoken and written academic discourse, the ways students are socialised into practices, genres or events of these academic discourses are also different. Studies have been conducted to investigate the conventions and practices of different genres such as group discussions, group project, and oral presentations (Duff, 1995; Morita, 2000; Kobayashi, 2003; Zappa-Hollman, 2007; Ho, 2011). They suggest that students be encouraged to comment, constructively criticise, and contribute stimulating questions or opinions which could be used for later discussions (Duff, 2009). It is thus important for students to be engaged in critical thinking and reasoned discussion by offering them critical constructive feedback (Ho 2011). However, the convention of spoken academic discourse is different based on different academic cultures. Thus, these intercultural differences and different language, cultures, and ideologies could cause affective issues and tensions (Duff, 2010). For students whose first language is different from the home language of the academic institution, some might not be recognised as competent and legitimate speakers of the language (Miller, 2004). Their voices
in the classroom may be lost and eventually self-confidence and the ability to speak too (Miller, 2004). Students may therefore view the practice of academic socialisation as potentially face-threatening and stressful (Duff, 2010; Jones, 1999). This view may also be linked to pressures, struggles, difficulties, and dilemmas.

This present study looks at how MSUK engaged in seminars including when they were in whole-class discussions. Whole-class discussions are one of the common practices in seminars in academic institutions that provide students with the opportunities and contexts to progressively socialise into the conventions of specific academic disciplines (Applebee, 1996; Kubota, 2001; Morgan, Whorton, & Gunsalus, 2000; Jones, 1999). Students are required to participate in the discussions by offering their opinions or questioning points they find incorrect or challenging. In explaining and clarifying their perspectives, students need to justify their opinions with the theories and concepts found in the textbooks and other academic materials or draw from their own learning experiences (Ho, 2011). Kim (2006) and Han (2007) suggest that in order for the students to successfully associate the theories and concepts with the topic of discussion, they need to do comprehensive reading of the course content. Students are expected to also understand the culture and norms of the group discussions if they want to participate.

By contributing to discussions, students are involved with the academic socialisation process which includes the relationships between multiple layers of academic texts, registers, and genres and contexts (Bloome & Bailey, 1992). Students could then continuously develop their capability of and perspectives on the course content. As they progress, the students will be able to master the course content and steadily become socialised into the conventions and practices of their field of study (Ho, 2011). In classroom interactions, students use language to interact with the tutor or other classmates. They share their thoughts and perspectives by contributing ideas and opinions, and they have a sense of belonging as they hold on to the membership they have within the classroom. From these interactions, students might change their perspectives on certain matters where their language may improve. Consequently, they may be accepted in the classroom community as the members; either novice or experts.

There are also studies on how Malaysian students interact in the Malaysian classrooms. For example, Mustapha and Nik Abd Rahman (2011) examined the participation patterns of undergraduate Malaysian students and found that most of the students participated minimally; which means they participated when they were asked by the lecturers. It was also found that the students mostly kept a low profile and preferred to respond using non-verbal gestures or with short answers when no one responded. Mustapha et al. (2010b) explored how the
undergraduate Malaysian students perceive their interactions and how these perceptions affect their participation revealing that the students understand participation as communication with the lecturers and other students and being engaged during class activities. Additionally, Abdullah et al. (2012) and Mustapha et al. (2010a) investigated the reasons students interact in the classroom and found that the main factors are the size of a classroom, personalities of the instructor and students, and the perception of peers.

To date, spoken academic discourse is still under-researched and work on the linguistic features of spoken academic corpora in higher education institutions is limited. Most studies involving higher education institutions have focused generally on lecture delivery as well as specific courses such as Engineering (Noor Mala & Ummul Khair, 2009; Singh, Narasuman, & Thambusamy, 2012; Wu, 2013). However, none of the research looked at Malaysian students’ engagement with spoken academic discourse, particularly their perceptions towards their interactions. However, most of these studies look at Malaysian students’ participation in English language classroom in the Malaysia setting and the present study focuses on their participation in UK content-modules. Hence, this study aims to investigate how Malaysian students perceive their interactions in UK seminars.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

Employing qualitative research method, this study aims to investigate Malaysian students’ engagement in UK seminars. The participants of this study consisted of nine Malaysian students in the UK with two male and seven female students. Below is a summary of the participants’ background:
Table 1: Participants’ background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Pseudonyms (Gender)</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>First language</th>
<th>Academic programme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Fatin (F)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>English and Malay</td>
<td>BSc (Hons) Accounting and Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Semek (F)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>BSc (Hons) Accounting and Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Izlin (F)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>BSc (Hons) Accounting and Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Ming (M)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>BSc (Hons) Accounting and Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Enot (F)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>BSc (Hons) Accounting and Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Ammar (M)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>BSc (Hons) Finance and Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Teratai (F)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>BSc (Hons) Business and Management Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Qaisara (F)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>BSc (Hons) Accounting and Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Puspa (F)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>BA (Hons) Architecture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These Malaysian students were chosen utilising purposive sampling based on two criteria: they have to be first-year students and registered in content modules in UK university. These students were approached before they arrived in the UK and once they have arrived, a meeting was set up to brief them of the study. The students were ensured that they would be anonymous where pseudonyms would be used.

The data were collected from interview and focus group discussion to examine the participants’ perspectives on their interactions. There were nine audio-recordings of interview sessions and two audio recordings of focus group discussions. These audio-recordings were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore how the Malaysian undergraduate students perceive their engagement in UK seminars. To achieve this aim, nine MSUK were interviewed and focus group discussions were conducted in two groups. The audio-recordings of these interviews and focus group discussions were analysed utilising Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis.
Table 2 below summarises the themes found from the analysis of the interviews and focus group discussions.

Table 2: Summary of codes and themes identified from the interviews and focus group discussions in the UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad category</th>
<th>Codes identified</th>
<th>Selected themes identified from interview transcripts</th>
<th>Selected themes identified from focus group discussion transcripts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MSUK interactions</td>
<td>MSUK verbal interactions</td>
<td>- Contributing opinions or ideas only when chosen or there was eye contact</td>
<td>- Contributing opinions or ideas only when chosen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Being an international student</td>
<td>- Experience of being marginalised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Malaysian own students asking questions</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Asking questions after class</td>
<td>- Asking questions after class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Language</td>
<td>- Language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 demonstrates that one of the themes generated from interviews and focus group discussion was ‘Contributing opinions or ideas only when chosen or there was eye contact’. This was mentioned by Izlin, Fatin, Ming, Ammar, Semek and Enot. This suggests that they would participate or share their answers during whole-class discussions if the tutor nominated them (Izlin, Fatin, Ammar and Semek) or if there was eye contact (Enot and Ming).
Izlin: yelah biasanya kalau lecturer macam specifically macam panggil nama kita. ‘Anis, the person at the back’...macam oh, wah baru jawab...

Translation: Usually, when the lecturer specifically called our names, “Izlin, the person at the back”, then I’ll answer the questions.

INT4

Semek: bila dia tanya saya jawab, kalau kena tembak soalan, macam dia tembak, ‘ha cuba jawab ni’...

Translation: When I’m asked, I’ll answer... If I’m asked to suddenly answer, for example, the tutor suddenly asked, ‘answer this question’.

INT2

Enot: kalau lecturer point nama, ha, kita jawablah jugak. Kalau dia tak point nama, tak...tak angkat tangan. Cuma kalau buat eye-contact ke, rasa macam...aa kalau buat eye-contact time dia tanya tu aaa, macam try lah jawab.

Translation: When the tutor called my name, I’d respond... If the lecturer doesn’t call my name, I don’t raise my hand. if there are eye-contacts, when there is eye-contact when the lecturer asked, (I’ll) try to answer.

INT3

Ming: I usually keep very quiet lah, but I usually pay attention, if they ask me or if there’s eye-contact with the tutor, I would answer. Sometimes.

INT8

Research also found that the Malaysian students perceive one of the reasons for them to participate during seminars is when the tutor calls their name or appoints them to share the answers to the questions (Mustapha & Nik Abd Rahman, 2011; Mustapha et al., 2010a). In contrast, a study showed that students were nervous and afraid if teachers summon them and ask difficult questions or questions they did not understand (Wong, 2009). This suggests tutors play a role in whether students contribute to seminar discussions.

Semek, Qaisara and Puspa also mentioned that they did not ask questions or contribute to seminar discussions because of language barrier. This is parallel with Mamat and Sham Rambely’s (2016) study which discovered that some Malay students in the UK did not contribute much to the seminars though a few did.
Put: sebab bahasa, satu...tak faham apa diorang cakap.
Translation: Because of language, one matter. (I) do not understand what they say.

INT9

Semek: Oh, sometimes I think there’s the language barrier. Because if I have a point to make, but I refuse to give people time to acknowledge my point because I need to speak a lot. Sometimes, I think it’s okay not to talk about that.

INT2

According to Semek, if she needed to explain more than she wanted to about her question, she would not ask questions. She also shared her experience of not being understood when she attempted to ask questions which results to her not wanting to contribute in future classes.

Semek: Actually, I have asked a question, but I asked only a bit to my group yesterday. So, they’re like, ‘I still don’t get it…’ then I asked again to Enot and Enot said she understood my question. After that, it depends actually on how much I want people to acknowledge that I, too, have questions and can do this.

INT2

When asked about how she perceived her interactions in seminars, Qaisara shared that she did not contribute much during seminars. Language barrier was mentioned by Qaisara to be the reasons she did not contribute to seminar although she felt that she needed to contribute. She shared that she was somewhat unfamiliar with the English language. This could possibly be caused by the fact that Qaisara was from a rural area where English is not spoken. She added that her English teacher in school did not use English when teaching the target language.
Qaisara: *Oo... kita macam sebab kita from, yang kita cakap yang kita sekolah Felda kan... so like kalau Felda Felda ni kitorang tak pernah cakap BI... so kalau dalam kelas BI pun cikgu tu macam tak practice benda alah tu so kitorang macam kalau dalam kelas pun, kalau BI pun duduk dengar cikgu tu bercerita.*

Translation: I’m like I’m from, like I said that I went to the rural school... so like the rural school we had never spoken in English... so when I was in an English class the teacher didn’t bother to use English...

INT7

Qaisara shared that it was difficult to understand what was said by the tutor and other students because they talked too fast. This was also discussed by other MSUK such as Izlin, Enot and Puspa during interviews and focus group discussions too.

Qaisara: *kita ada macam kelas yang, yang macam kita tak sama dengan korang kan, dah lah Malaysia sorang-sorang, macam huhhh, tak tau dengan siapa, macam tu... kita punya kawan pun macam, depends jugak, ada yang kita boleh faham, ada yang kita tak faham, kalau tak faham macam tu*  

Translation: I have some classes that I’m not with all of you right? I’m the only Malaysian, like huhhh, I don’t know who, something like that... with my friends, it depends, there were a few whom I understand, there were a few whom I don’t understand, if I don’t understand.

Izlin: *cakap laju...*  

Qaisara: *Haa*  

Enot: *kalau orang British la. Kalau cakap dengan orang local, tu sangat*  

Izlin: *American cakap laju gila.*  

Translation: Speak fast.

Yes.

If they’re British. If (I) speak with the locals, really fast.

Americans speak really fast

This suggests that Izlin, Qaisara, Enot, Semek and Puspa perceived that they did not interact much in seminar and according to them, it was because of language barrier. These students’ perceptions are similar to Abdullah et al. (2012) study which found that one of the reasons...
Malaysian undergraduate students were passive during classroom discussions was because of they lack the language ability. This suggests that personal factors such as second language proficiency does influence how Puspa and Qaisara’s perceive their interactions, in line with what was found by Thi Mai (2019), Mandefro (2019), Zhao (2016), and Susak (2016): English language proficiency determines students’ interactional behaviour in classroom. Students whose English language is their second language may not have the proficiency to express their thoughts well, particularly when the medium of instruction is the English language. Susak (2016) found that one of students’ traits influencing their participation was language barrier where half of the participants in his study mentioned that they were not comfortable sharing their opinions in the English language.

However, Ming and Fatin mentioned that language was not an issue for them as they considered the English language as their first language. Both of them use the English language with their family members and close friends. Fatin mentioned that she would contribute if necessary especially during small group discussions. However, Ming mentioned that he did not interact much during seminar although he admitted during the focus group discussion that he did not have problem studying in an English-speaking country because he considered the English language his first language where he used the language to communicate with his family members and friends. He also shared during the interview session that he did his foundation studies in one of the academic institutions in the UK. This means language does not affect his ability to contribute to the discussion.

When asked whether they asked questions, the theme generated from the interview and focus group discussions was ‘Asking questions after class’. According to Ming and Alias (2007), the Malaysian students in their study did not ask questions because they perceived asking the tutor as unnecessary considering that the tutor had already explained everything to them. Similarly, in the current research, Semek shared during the interview session that ‘selalu lecturer dah bagi semua’ (if the lecturer has given everything) (INT2), hence there was no need for her to ask questions. The Malaysian students in Ming and Alias’s (2007) study also mentioned that they could ask the tutor after the seminar or ask their friends. This is similar to what was shared by the MSUK during interviews and focus group discussion.
Teratai: Kami jumpa hari tu like tutor tu after class, tanyalah dia apa yang tak faham, kan.

Translation: at that time, we went to see the teacher personally and asked things that we did not understand.

INT9

Semek: I’d chase her (the tutor) after the seminar. So, it’s like that. I don’t really ask in seminar, seriously I don’t.

INT2

Semek: kalau tak tanya, tanya kiri ke
Translation: If I don’t ask in class, I’ll ask the people beside me.

INT2

The same point was also discussed during one of the focus group discussions.

Izlin: dak, kita tanya tapi lepas kelas lah
Semek: Ha
Izlin: yang tu ha lagi, lagi macam...lagi, selesa...
Enot: macam pada aku...ikut seminar...
Izlin: lecturer Finance pun kita tanya juga lepas kelas hari tu...
Semek: Dulu-dulu...
Izlin: Sekali je...
Semek: Satu dua kali jugak...
Izlin: 2 kali
Semek: 2 kali
Izlin: dia macam baik juga lah...

Translation: No, we do ask, but after the class
Yes
It’s like, more comfortable
Like for me, it depends on the seminar
Depends on the seminar
With finance lecturer, we did ask after the class
In the beginning
Once
Once or twice
Twice
Twice
She’s nice.

FGD2

Izlin, Semek and Enot agreed that they did not ask questions during seminars because it was not necessary (FGD2). While all the students in FGD2 agreed with each other that they did not ask questions during seminars, there was a mixed opinion regarding this during the FGD1 because Fatin expressed it differently. Fatin shared that if students do not know or understand something, they should ask questions. She also added that tutors play an important role in encouraging students to ask questions during seminars.

During the focus group discussion, Izlin also shared that being an international student, she was conscious when she was in a seminar and felt she needed to contribute something.
Izlin : Saya international student and saya kena contribute something…
Translation I’m an international student and I have to contribute something.
INT1

However, Semek shared her experience of being marginalised by other students during small group discussions as she used the sentence ‘foreigner or international student’s opinion not really matter or doesn’t really make sense’. It is highly likely that it caused her to believe it was not necessary for her to offer her opinions or ideas and consequently marginalised herself from the discussion.

5.0 CONCLUSION
This study aims to explore how first-year undergraduate Malaysian students perceive their interactions in UK seminars. Nine Malaysian students were involved in the process of data collection: interview and focus group discussions. The study found that MSUK have different views regarding their interactions. Semek, Izlin, Enot, Fatin and Ammar shared that they would only participate when the tutor nominated them or when there is eye-contact between them and the tutor. Semek during an interview mentioned that she did not ask questions during seminars because there was no need to do so as the tutor would already provide them with the necessary information or that they could ask further after the seminar. Enot, Izlin and Teratai agreed with Semek that they also ask questions to the tutor after the seminar. However, Fatin disagreed as she mentioned that it is important for students to ask questions during seminars if they need further clarifications. Qaisara, Puspa and Semek also perceive that they did not contribute much during seminar discussions because of language barriers. As language is one of the main elements of academic discourse socialisation (Duff, 2010), students’ lack of language proficiency might limit their interaction during seminars which highly likely hinder their ability and potential to become expert members of the seminars. In fact, Semek and Qaisara shared that they were conscious of being an international student that Qaisara felt she needed to contribute to the seminar discussion. Nonetheless, Semek mentioned that she felt marginalised because she was an international student.

These perceptions limited their academic socialisation as they interacted less with the tutor and other students. As a result, they may not be able to progress in becoming the expert member of the targeted community, which in the context of this study is the UK academic seminars. The findings of this study could contribute to future research related to educational issues in cross-cultural and multilingual settings. This suggests the need to change academic cultural expectations in academic settings especially with today’s internationalisation world,
instead of expecting students to follow only certain approaches. Different perceptions by the Malaysian students in the UK suggests that academic institutions should be more flexible in their expectation as language barrier, personal preferences and self-consciousness may contribute to students’ interactional behaviour. In fact, their personal preference may be caused by long exposure towards Malaysian education culture which is different from the UK’s. It is suggested that these institutions attempt to better understand the students and their needs in order to help them socialise with the other members and consequently become expert members of the community. Examining how students perceive themselves in a new or/and familiarised academic convention could provide additional perceptions towards their practices especially for those involved within the community such as the students themselves, lecturers, tutors, parents, and ministry. For example, understanding the students’ perceptions towards their interactions in seminars would allow tutors to adapt their teaching styles if necessary, to suit students’ preferences.

REFERENCES


