Towards a Comprehensive Model of English as a Second Language Learning and Teaching in the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Low English proficiency among secondary school students is a major concern in Malaysia, especially in the context of the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools since Malaysian students who have spent eleven to thirteen years studying the English language are still not able to master it upon completing secondary schooling. In addition, a significant number of Malaysian graduates are unemployed, and even those who are employed receive complaints from the employers due to their limited English proficiency. It is argued that student-, teacher- and school-level factors may impact on students’ English proficiency. A significant amount of research related to these factors has been conducted, ranging from finding universal trends to identifying differences. These studies have examined the relationships between students’ characteristics, attitudes and motivation, anxiety and self-efficacy as well as conceptions of and approaches to learning; teachers’ characteristics and approaches to teaching; as well as schools’ demographic variables such as instructional time, student-teacher ratio, resources and facilities as well as curriculum and assessment. Researchers have shown that these factors may impact on students’ English proficiency in a single-level model. However, numerous scholars have also argued that these factors may interact with each other and thus focussing on just a single level may not be sufficient to explain the complexity of English language learning and teaching. In addition, limited research has been conducted in the Malaysian context, especially in the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools.

This research study examines the student-, teacher- and school-level factors, their interrelationships and their impact on students’ English as a second language.
proficiency. A quantitative research design was used including questionnaires and assessment checklist to collect data from the respondents. The respondents in this study involved the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools located at the urban areas in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Perak and Penang, the Senior 1 English language teachers, and all Senior 1 students who were taught by these teachers. A number of scales and demographic items related to student-, teacher- and school-level factors were administered for the purpose of this study. All scales except the demographic items employed in this study were validated, calibrated and verified using the Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Rasch Analysis. In addition, as many teachers or raters from different schools and classes were involved in rating students’ English language proficiency, their scores were adjusted by modelling rater judgement through the many facets Rasch analysis. The raw scores obtained from the responses in all scales were anchored to obtain the Weighted Likelihood Estimates for use in subsequent analyses which included the analyses for the student- and teacher-level models as well as the hierarchical linear model.

The Structural Equation Modelling approach was employed to examine the student- and teacher-level models. For the student-level model, all scales or variables and demographic items were examined with regards to their interrelationships and how they influenced students’ English language proficiency. For the teacher-level model, the interrelationships of the variables and demographic items were examined. In addition, as data collected were of a hierarchical structure, the relationships among the nested variables in school-, teacher- and student-levels, how these variables influenced students’ English language proficiency, and the cross-level interactions of these variables were examined in the hierarchical linear model.
Results of the analyses show that student-, teacher- and school-level variables influence students’ English language proficiency. A significant finding from this study is that students’ motivation, attentiveness in class, the use of deep and surface learning approaches as well as the student-focused teaching approaches and the number of students in schools directly influence students’ English language proficiency. The findings further indicate that students who have higher levels of motivation and attentiveness as well as who use deep learning approaches more tend to have higher English proficiency levels. On the other hand, students who use surface learning approaches more tend to have lower English proficiency levels. The findings also indicate that the more teachers use student-focused teaching approaches and the more students schools have, the more likely students achieve at a higher level in English. Furthermore, while the number of story books in the library moderates the effect of students’ attentiveness on their English proficiency negatively, the emphasis in reading skills moderates positively the effect of student-focused teaching approaches on students’ English proficiency. In addition, teachers’ formal professional development activities positively moderate the effect of students’ motivation on students’ English proficiency. Moreover, multiple interrelationships among the student-level variables are identified in the student-level model. Although not as complicated as the student-level model, the results from the teacher-level model also indicate the interrelationships among the teacher-level variables. Thus, the results of this study support the idea that student-, teacher- and school-level factors interact with each other and impact on students’ English language proficiency.

This research is particularly meaningful with regards to its contribution to the theoretical, practical and methodological implications in the English language.
learning and teaching. These findings suggest new courses of action for designing a suitable curriculum for English learners, strategies for teaching and improving teaching skills as well as a better environment for the learning and teaching of English in the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools. The student-, teacher- and school-level factors need to be taken into considerations when one aims to improve students’ English language proficiency.
Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Signed

Date _____ 20 April 2016 _____
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