

# **Learning English in Multicultural Malaysia: Are Learners Motivated?**

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## **Abstract**

There is a general belief that Asian students are primarily motivated by a desire to succeed at university and obtain a well-paid career upon graduation. Kember et al. (1999) discovered in a series of interviews with Hong Kong students that many statements about career preparation and career relevance showed that they expected the courses to provide both intrinsic and career motivation. Kember (2000) proposed that these students have internalised a value for a high-status well-paid careers and suggested that these findings are applicable to other Asian contexts.

This paper discusses the applicability of the above findings to the Malaysian context in the learning of English as a Second language (ESL). Can we generalise the findings of a homogenous society like Hong Kong to a multicultural society like Malaysia? What are other dynamics involved and in what ways do they affect students' motivation in learning English. This paper will refer to the findings of a doctoral thesis, which explored distance, and on-campus learners' conceptions of their approaches to studying, and their perceptions of the English Proficiency courses offered by a public university in Malaysia. A mixed approach comprising questionnaires and semi-structured interviews was used to gather data for the research. The findings reveal that motivating students to learn English in Malaysia is no straightforward task as it involves the interplay of several factors.

## **Introduction**

Motivation is a term which is commonly used in second language learning (L2). It is generally acknowledged that motivation is important in L2. As Dörnyei (2001:5) puts it, "in the vast majority of cases learners with sufficient motivation can achieve a working knowledge of an L2, regardless of their language aptitude or other cognitive characteristics". However, there are fewer consensuses on concepts of motivation which include extent and types of motivation. Gardner and Lambert (1959) classified students as instrumentally orientated and integratively orientated. Students were considered the former if they were learning French because it would be useful in obtaining a job or if it made them more educated. The emphasis in this case was on pragmatic

reasons for learning a language. On the other hand, students were classified the latter if they emphasised one or two reasons that stressed either meeting and conversing with more and varied people, or as a means of better understanding French.

Extrinsic motivation is commonly associated with instrumental orientation and intrinsic motivation with integrative orientation. Intrinsic motivation is generally described as behaviour performed for its own sake in order to experience pleasure and satisfaction such as the joy of doing a particular activity or satisfying one's curiosity. Extrinsic motivation involves performing behaviour as a mean towards an end, that is, to receive some extrinsic reward (e.g. good grades) or to avoid punishment (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Vallerand, 1997).

The division between extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation are found in the three major questionnaires on approaches to studying: the Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI) (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Ramsden and Entwistle, 1981) and the Learning Process and Studying Process Questionnaires (LPQ and SPQ)(Bigg, 1987). In these instruments, intrinsic motivation is considered an integral part of meaning orientation and extrinsic motivation a component of a reproducing orientation (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Biggs, 1987). This is in line with the extensive literature on extrinsic motivation, its inter-relationship with intrinsic motivation and their effects on learning. There is a general agreement that intrinsic motivation enhances learning whereas research findings on extrinsic motivation are less consistent. Some researchers argue that any form of extrinsic motivation will decrease or destroy intrinsic motivation and the love of learning (Holt, 1964; Bruner, 1962; Montessori, 1967; Neill, 1960). Morgan (1984) proposes that intrinsic motivation is undiminished or promoted by praise, positive associations, freedom of choice and rewards associated by competent performance but likely to diminish with unpleasant association, punishment, close supervision or unnecessary rewards. Cameron and Pierce (1994) surmise that overall rewards do not decrease intrinsic motivation. This is supported by Kohn (1996), Lepper, Keavney and Drake (1996), and Ryan and Deci (1996).

Kember et al. (1999) disagree with this conceptualisation of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. He feels that since most of the research on motivation have been undertaken on children and in

laboratory experiments, it is difficult to extrapolate these findings to students in higher education. More importantly, he objects to the generalization of research studies undertaken in the West to Asian students. He proposes the use of the Cognitive Evaluation Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) that focuses on perceptions of subjects to determine whether students are likely to perceive career expectations as informational or controller. According to this theory, if extrinsic motivation is perceived as providing information or feedback, then intrinsic motivation will be increased through an increased perception of self-determination or competence. On the other hand, if extrinsic motivation is seen as controlling factors, then intrinsic motivation will be decreased by the changing perceived locus of causality (Deci, 1972).

Kember et al. believe that the most relevant concept on this aspect is that of Stipek's internalised motivation (1988). Stipek describes internalised motivation as occurring when children (and presumably older students) learn that certain behaviours are valued in a society. They eventually act in a way that is consistent with their beliefs (Ryan, Connell & Deci, 1985). Kember et al. posit that motivation through this channel does not lead to a diminution of any existing intrinsic interest in the task. Based on interviews transcripts and knowledge of common beliefs of Hong Kong Society, Kember et al. argue that that it could be common for Hong Kong students to have internalised a value of high status well-paid careers. They use Stevenson and Lee (1996)'s views to support their claim. According to Stevenson and Lee, traditionally the Chinese societies have valued education for personal improvement and social advancement. Thus, Kember et al. reason that a course which boosts career prospects would therefore, be seen as enhancing self-regulation and would not diminish intrinsic motivation and might well increase it.

Kember et al. further propose that his arguments could be applied to Chinese students in other developing countries. The purpose of this paper is to investigate to what extent Kember's arguments are applicable to Malaysian on-campus and distance learners of two different ethnic origins namely Chinese and Malays in the learning of ESL.

## **The present study**

This study was undertaken to find out the applicability of Kember's findings to the Malaysian context. It investigated the motivational elements of approaches to studying of four types of learners: Malay distance learners and on-campus learners and Chinese distance learners and on-campus learners in Malaysia and compared them with those of Kember et al. (1999). The purpose was to find out the effects of career motivation on the learning of a L2 in the case of these four types of learners.

Kember in his study on the motivational elements of approaches to studying used Biggs' LPQ and SPQ. However, in this study, the questionnaire formulated was based on Entwistle and Ramsden's ASI. The items in the Extrinsic Motivation of ASI contain items equivalent to Kember's Career Motivation (see Appendix 1 for items). The ASI is equally reliable and valid as LPQ and SPQ. The new questionnaire was named the New Approaches to Studying Inventory (NASI) (See Appendix 2 for meanings of scales/subscales). It comprised items taken mainly from the Revised Approaches to Studying Inventory (RASI) (Entwistle and Tait, 1994) supplemented with some subscales and items from the original ASI (Ramsden, 1983). Since this NASI is drawn from two much-tested questionnaire, it was deemed unnecessary to further validate its reliability.

The questionnaires were distributed to all first- and second-year on-campus and distance learners who had just taken their first English Proficiency courses (EPCs). The subjects were taken from three faculties of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) i.e., Faculty of Social Sciences, Faculty of Applied Sciences, and Faculty of Business Administration. The subjects comprised learners of various proficiency levels in English and of various ethnic origins. In view of the small number of students of the other races in the sample population, this study will only analyse the results of learners from the two main ethnic groups in West Malaysia namely Malays and Chinese.

Out of a total of 1500 questionnaires distributed, 721 questionnaires were returned, 351 questionnaires (about 49%) from the distance learners and 370 questionnaires (about 51%) from the on-campus learners. See Fig 1 for a breakdown of the number of respondents according to

ethnic origins. As can be seen from Fig. 1, the number of respondents of Indian origin was very much smaller than the other two ethnic groups that was why this group was not considered in this study.

Mode	Ethnic origin				Total
	Malay	Chinese	Indian	others	
Distance Learners	197	110	28	16	351
On-campus learners	243	103	12	12	370
Total	440	213	40	28	721

Fig. 1 A breakdown of respondents according to categories

## Comparison and Discussion of Results

A factor analysis was carried out to identify the key constructs present in the two groups of learners of different ethnic origins. Difference in modes of learning was also taken into consideration. To begin with, principal component factor analysis was performed (with SPSS 9.0 programme) upon the scores obtained on the subscales of NASI of the four groups of learners: Malay and Chinese distance learners and Malay and Chinese on-campus learners, using varimax<sup>®</sup> (orthogonal) rotation with Kaiser normalization. This exercise yielded a three-factor solution for each of the four groups of learners. The % of variance for Malay distance learners was 59.66% and for Chinese distance learners was 52.66%. The % of variance for Malay on-campus learners was 58.86% and for Chinese on-campus learners was 55.73%. In considering factor loadings, low loadings of below 0.3 were not taken into account.

Since the study is only interested in factors that the Extrinsic Motivation loads onto, only these factors will be considered. As revealed by the resulting pattern factor matrix in Fig. 2, Extrinsic Motivation loads onto Factor 3 for both Chinese and Malay learners on-campus learners and Extrinsic Motivation loads onto Factor 2 for both Chinese and Malay learners distance learners.

Distance learners		On-campus learners	
Malay	Chinese	Malay	Chinese
<b>Factor 3</b>	<b>Factor 3</b>	<b>Factor 2</b>	<b>Factor 2</b>
% of variance = 10.62%	% of variance = 13.52%	% of variance = 13.50	% of variance = 17.69
<b>Scale/subscale (loading):</b>	<b>Scale/subscale (loading):</b>	<b>Scale/subscale (loading):</b>	<b>Scale/subscale (loading):</b>
1. Difficulty in making sense (0.55)	1. Difficulty in Making Sense (0.79)	Relying of memorising (0.31)	Relying of memorising (0.59)
2. Determine to excel (negative) (-0.33)	2. Use of Evidence and Logic (negative) (-0.32)	Difficulty in making sense (0.67)	Difficulty in making sense (0.67)
3. Lack of Direction (0.76)	3. Lack of Direction (0.76)	Unrelatedness (0.36)	Unrelatedness (0.76)
4. Extrinsic Motivation (0.64)	4. Extrinsic Motivation (0.68)	Concern about coping (0.34)	Concern about coping (0.68)
		Lack of Direction (0.72)	Lack of Direction (0.51)
		Extrinsic Motivation (0.60)	Extrinsic Motivation (0.48)
		<u>Active Interest/ Critical Stance (0.41)</u>	<u>Active Interest/ Critical Stance (0.39)</u>

Fig. 2 Comparison of factor solutions of Malay learners and Chinese learners

The findings demonstrate that Extrinsic Motivation is associated with ineffective approaches to learning in all four groups of learners which means that in all four groups, Extrinsic Motivation has a negative connotation. The loading of Active Interest/Critical stance in both the Malay and Chinese on-campus learners hints at the possibility of a link between Extrinsic Motivation and Active Interest/Critical Stance (see Fig.2). However, since this is the only item that can be classified as an effective approach to learning in these four factors, it would be over presumptuous to claim that these factors are in anyway associated with effective approaches to learning. Applying the Cognitive Evaluation Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), this will mean that the Extrinsic Motivation is seen as a controlling factor in a majority of the learners and will not lead to an increased perception of self-determination or competence. These findings contradict Kember et al.'s (1999) proposal that students are aware of the positive qualities of courses and

expected the courses to provide both intrinsic and career motivation (described as extrinsic motivation here).

The findings of Thang's semi-structured interviews of 13 distance learners (in Thang 2001) support the findings of this study. They suggest that all the interviewees express awareness of the importance of learning English for future career goals which is a clear indication of their awareness of the extrinsic value of learning English. However, out of these 13, only two indicate genuine efforts to improve their English. These two appear motivated by an intrinsic desire to acquire new knowledge and a genuine interest in improving their English.

Applying the Cognitive Evaluation Theory, this will mean that the Career motivation is seen as a controlling factor in eleven out of the thirteen students which leads to a decrease in intrinsic motivation. It is perceived as providing information or feedback only in two students. Parilah's study (2002) on low achievers in UKM also supports these findings. The low achievers in her study recognize the instrumental value of learning English and perceive it positively in terms of its use, standard and status but display a lack of positive attitude towards the learning of English. They also seem to be uninterested in the cultural aspects of the English Language.

In my opinion the findings of Lee's qualitative doctoral study (2003) on UKM students will help us to understand why Kember's proposal regarding career motivation does not apply to the Malaysian context. In her study, Lee proposes that Peirce's term (1995) "investment" is more appropriate in describing the term "motivation" in learning a second language. Peirce argues for the term "investment" because she feels that the traditional concepts of motivation dominant in the field of Second Language Acquisition do not take into account the complex relations of power, identity and language learning. She views the concept of return on investment in learning a language as learners investing their time and effort in learning a second language in expectation of a reward with "wider range of symbolic and materials resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital (Peirce, 1995:17).

Lee's study shows that resentment still exists towards using English within interpersonal contexts particularly among Malays who are not proficient in English resulting in those attempting to use

English being labelled as “showing off”. The use of English is also seen as trying to be like the Whites. Hostility against the use of English also exists because it is seen as a relic of colonialism. In addition, the English language is also associated with Christianity which means that Malays are seen as not being a good Muslim when they use English. Chinese students also face most of these problems. One Chinese interviewee reveals that she is labelled as “too westernised” because she speaks mostly English.

Thus, in the Malaysian context the advantages of learning English in terms of Career advancement and future job prospects are in many cases overshadowed by the demand of society and the desire to conform to the norms of society. As Lee (2003:148-149) puts it:

... language learners will invest in a language if the rewards are perceived as worthwhile. However, acquiring or mastering a language is more complicated than just positive gains and the reward factor. In a complex postcolonial society such as Malaysia, investment does not bring straightforward returns or dividends. Using English requires that one be very attuned to the localised contexts and whether its use is acceptable to the situation. Although the acquisition of the English language has many advantages, “using it” can bring about non-acceptance, resentment, marginalisation, or a combination thereof.

## **Suggestions on how to motivate Malaysian ESL learners**

I am not suggesting that these findings can be extended to all Malaysian ESL learners. However, the findings of this study do point to the necessity to consider these factors in motivating Malaysian ESL learners. Methods recommended in books on Second Language Teaching and Learning will not suffice if the “stigma” associated with the use of English is not resolved. Lee (2003) discovers that those who manage to be proficient in the language are those who are bold enough to go against the norms of society. Thus, it is evident that it is not possible to come up with any quick and easy solution to the problem.

The introduction of the teaching of Mathematics and Science in English by the Malaysian Government starting from last year (beginning with students from Primary One, Form One and Lower Six) is a positive step in giving a new role to English. If Malaysian learners can perceive

and accept English as a Language of Science and Technology and dissociate it from its previous negative connections, then the chance of them being proficient in English will increase significantly. The Malaysian Government must be aware of such limiting factors and includes redefining the position and identity of English in Malaysia in its plans in promoting English as the language of Science and Technology.

## About the Author

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## Appendix 1

Items in Kember's Career Motivation (1999)	Item in the Extrinsic Motivation of the New Approaches to Study (NASI)
1. I chose my present courses largely with a view to the job situation when I graduate rather than out of their intrinsic interest to me.	1. I chose my present courses mainly to give me a chance of a really good job afterwards.
2. Whether I like it or not, I can see that further education is for me a good way to get a well-paid or secure job.	2. I generally choose courses more from the way they fit in with career plans than from my own interests.
3. I almost resent having to spend a further three or four years studying after leaving school but feel that the end results will make it worthwhile.	3. I suppose I am more interested in the qualifications I'll get than in the courses I'm taking.
1. I am at college/university mainly because I feel that I will be able to obtain a better job if I have a tertiary qualification.	4. My main reason for being here is that it will help me to get a better job.

**Appendix 2: Meaning of the scale/subscales of the NASI**

<b>Scale/subscale</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<p><b>2. Deep Approach</b></p> <p>Looking for meaning Active interest/critical stance</p> <p>Relating and organising ideas</p> <p>Use evidence and logic</p>	<p>Learners look for meaning in studying.</p> <p>Learners have an active interest in subjects studied. They interact actively with what is being learnt and link what is being studied with real life.</p> <p>Learners relate new information to previous information actively and organise ideas mentally.</p> <p>Learners use evidence and logic in trying to understand materials and to arrive at conclusions.</p>
<p><b>3. Surface Approach</b></p> <p>Relying on memorising Difficulty in making sense</p> <p>Unrelatedness</p> <p>Concern about coping</p>	<p>Learners rely on rote learning.</p> <p>Learners find difficulty in understanding and making sense of what is being read and things that have to be remembered.</p> <p>Learners find difficulty in perceiving what is important and also in seeing an overall picture or how ideas fit together.</p> <p>Learners are unduly concerned over ability to cope with work.</p>
<p><b>4. Strategic Approach</b></p> <p>Determination to excel</p> <p>Effort in studying</p> <p>Organised studying</p> <p>Time Management</p>	<p>Learners are competitive and self-confident and determined to achieve success.</p> <p>Learners put in extra effort to make sure that work is being done well. They work hard and are able to concentrate well on work.</p> <p>Learners have organized study methods. They make an effort to ensure that appropriate conditions and materials for study are available.</p> <p>Learners are able to organize time effectively and able to abide by good study plans.</p>
<p><b>4. Lack of direction</b></p>	<p>Learners are cynical and disenchanted about higher education. Feel driven to enter university to please others.</p>
<p><b>5. Academic-self confidence</b></p>	<p>Learners feel confident about ability to cope with work. They have no difficulty in understanding new information and ideas.</p>
<p><b>6. Extrinsic Motivation</b></p>	<p>Learners are primarily motivated by the qualifications and the prospects of a good job on graduation.</p>
<p><b>7. Syllabus-boundedness</b></p>	<p>Learners have the intention to restrict learning to the defined syllabus and tasks requirements.</p>