

## **The Role of Peers and Cultural Tools in Supporting Autonomous Learning Behaviours among Malay Tertiary Learners**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Learning is a social process, where a learner's cognitive processes occur within social events that transpire when an individual interacts with people, objects and events in his or her culture and environment. This qualitative study of a small scale is grounded in the Socio Cultural Theory which postulates learning to be a social enterprise and supported by cultural tools which aid learning. The study was undertaken on a group of Malay tertiary learners to probe how far social sources, namely peers, impact their learning of vocabulary items in their preparation for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Besides social sources, the use of cultural tools, (namely, the dictionary and guessing meaning from context) were also probed to enquire how learners capitalise on these resources to make their learning process meaningful and to encourage autonomous learning. Data for the case study were collected through qualitative means of retrospective interviews and journal entries of the participants. The study found that cultural tools such as the dictionary and guessing meaning from context are useful sources for learning. Peers, as social sources, also play a significant role in improving the learners' affective states, since tasks carried out in groups are valued and held in importance, in accordance with the Malay cultural trait which emphasises group work and communal activities.

*Keywords:* Autonomy, peers, cultural tools, dictionary, learning behaviours

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The word "autonomous" comes from the Greek word *eaautos* which means "self" (Roberts, 2001). It is opposed to *Hetero*, which is Greek for "other" (heteronomous - subject to another's law or rule). Autonomy has been considered in various contexts

as a personal human trait (which includes attitudes, abilities and various capacities to direct one's learning), as a political measure or as an educational approach. In education, it is seen from different perspectives, either as a means or as an end in education, or in a reciprocal relationship comprising both. Over time, many great philosophers and thinkers like Galileo, Rousseau, Dewey, Kilpatrick, Marcel, Jacotot, Payne and Quick have covered grounds on the importance of autonomy in education by extending their ideas in different eras in history (Balcikanli, 2008, cited in Giang, 2010 p. 12). In current literature on education and learning, the perspective of autonomy as a process is more prevalent (Thanasoulas, 2000; Giang, 2010; Reinders, 2010; Barillaro, 2011). In fact, since ancient time, the notion of learning independently has been considered a process, instead of product (Giang, 2010).

The term most frequently used in the teaching and learning process is "learner autonomy". The term was first coined in 1981 by Henri Holec, who is often regarded as the 'father' of learner autonomy. One obvious observation is the plethora of terms to describe this kind of learning as many definitions have been offered, depending on writers, contexts and the level of debate engaged in. Generally, the literature on autonomous learning dwells on a range of related terms and synonyms, namely language awareness (Lier, 1996), independence (Sheerin, 1991), self-direction (Candy, 1991), andragogy (Knowles, 1980), lifelong learning and learner control. Morgan (2006) says that

these terms are used both interchangeably and distinctively. Although these terms draw on different perspectives for different people, there is a lot of research and contemplation on what essentially focuses on self-directed, autonomous, independent and student-centred language learning. In a nutshell, autonomous learning is related to self-directed study, in which learners take control of and responsibility for their own learning process.

In the Malaysian context, it is contended that the majority of Malaysian learners, as the protagonists in the learning process, shun responsibility in learning. Studies conducted by Thang (2005, 2003, 2001, cited in Thang & Alias, 2007), Thang and Alias (2007), Thang (2009) on tertiary learners' autonomous learning initiatives at various (public and private) institutions of higher learning in Malaysia indicate that majority of the teaching and learning contexts are teacher-centred, if not fully teacher-dependent, that is, they favour the traditional role of the teacher as knowledge transmitter, guide and motivator. In the same vein, Nordin and Naginder (2004, p. 11) carried out a study on the efficacy of process writing in improving language ability and found that "the students seemed to shun autonomy and empowerment. They refrained attending to their language problems independently and were unwilling to take full-charge of their learning process." Similarly, Nair and Ratnam's (2003) study on readiness for empowerment found that learners are just not willing to empower themselves,

even if the teacher desires them to shoulder responsibility for their own learning. They lack the drive to be self-directed - within and beyond formal learning. Several other studies (for example, Hassan & Fauzee Selamat, 2002; Rai, Krishnasamy & Nair, 2003) showed fair to low degree of awareness and practices on autonomous learning behaviours prevalent among Malaysian learners. In vocabulary learning, Kaur and Abdullah (2007) found an apparent lack of awareness of the deeper aspects of knowing a word. Value of word knowledge about how depth of vocabulary knowledge might contribute to ability to use the items both productively and receptively seems to restrain learners' learning, owing to narrow paradigms and other restraints. Therefore, a study that looks at the social circle of the learners is required to probe the extent and ways learners' peers and other tools (physical and mental strategies) can encourage and support autonomous learning behaviours among Malaysian learners.

### **LEARNING AS A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE**

As a cursory reminder, we need to take note that although some of the varied terms (such as independence) may imply an isolated and private activity, autonomous learning is nevertheless embedded and supported in a social context in one's environment. In other words, learner autonomy involves complementary roles of the external social interaction and the internal cognitive processes. Among the many ways of

planning and ensuring successful learning, one of the avenues is by employing social strategies or social resources in learning, namely peers and teachers. The important role of these social resources or the social domain serves to ensure autonomy because learners' awareness of the social context, the parameters of learning, as well as awareness of the constraints that hinge them, enable them to propel and steer themselves to gradual independence. As a form of independent learning (Thanasoulas, 2002), autonomy does not mean learners study alone and is therefore, not an isolated learning process. In fact, achieving self-direction is paradoxically said to be a collaborative process (Abdullah, 2001; Guo & Zhang, 2010).

### **THE STUDY**

In classroom learning, learner behaviour is tied to a complex interaction of broad social and cultural factors (Sullivan, 1996). As culture is generally defined as a set of beliefs, values, attitudes, habits and forms of behaviour that are shared by a society and transmitted from generation to generation (Ayob, 2004), it thus forms the fundamental building block of an individual's identity and societal role which is learned and established through social learning of cultural role expectations. Hence, cultural traits impinge classroom interaction patterns and reactions towards the instruction, instructor, as well as peers.

In the oriental culture of the Malay ethnic group, the social context is deemed

very important (Hansen, 1996). Studies have found the Malays to be a collectivist society with a collectivist mind (Abdullah, 1996; Trompenaars, 1993, cited in Zawawi, 2008) For the Malays, life is viewed as an integrated whole (Kwon Jung & Ah, 2004) and the individual is an integral part of the community he / she belongs to. In the Malay learning culture, certain traits are significant, which characterise and provide the society its unique identity of being a strongly culture-bound ethnic group. Research shows that learners of Malay origin are generally tactile-kinesthetic type and are inclined to work in groups rather than doing individual assignments. This was evidenced by Reid's (1987) landmark study which found Malay learners to be relational and non-analytical learners (learners who prefer working individually). The preference for group learning (Abdullah, 1999; Naginder, 2004; Arumugam, 2011) can be traced back to the Malay culture and tradition. There is a strong sense of collaboration and cooperation within the Malay community as reflected in their activities such as gotong-royong, cooking together or mass cooking during wedding feasts, as well as collective harvesting of crops among farmers. The spirit of kinship and acknowledgement of one's contribution to the larger community is also highly prevalent in the Malay community. Thus, a study that investigates the interplay of the external forces, such as peers on the learners in the context of the Malay culture, is deemed viable. This case

study probes how peers influence one's autonomous learning efforts of vocabulary items. Besides the role of peers, this study also probes how other tools such as the dictionary and method of guessing meaning from context are employed by learners in order to enhance their autonomous learning in the learning of lexical items.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objective of this study is to see how learning is carried out in the sociocultural context of the Malay community, within the scope of learning lexical items. External factors or social sources in this study relate to peers (those at par or more capable than the learners), who are the medium that provide the impetus to stimulate learners' autonomous behaviours in the learning of lexical items. The role of the teachers (as another social source) is not probed in the study. Cultural tools are the real tools, strategies, semiotics, or physical objects (Scott & Palinscar, 2013), which learners use as resources to facilitate vocabulary learning. These cultural tools could be anything from a vocabulary notebook, dictionary use, translation method, or semiotics like contextual guessing for the learning of lexical items. In this study, cultural objects are defined through the use of two tools: a) the tool of using a dictionary, and b) the tool of guessing meaning from context in order to see how these impact the learning of vocabulary items among learners.

## Research Questions

In order to address the research objectives described above, these research questions guided the study:

The research questions for the study are as follows.

1. How do peers support autonomous learning of lexical items in the Malay culture?
2. How does the use of dictionary support autonomous learning of lexical items?
3. How does guessing meaning in context support autonomous learning of lexical items?

## Theoretical Underpinnings

The Socio Cultural Theory, which is also known as the Sociohistoric Theory, is pertinent in demonstrating the social context of learning. It was proposed by Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896-1934), a renowned Russian psychologist, in the 1920s, in the era of post Russian Revolution. A central tenet of this theory is that the external social world or social interactions around an individual play a key role in his or her higher order cognitive functions and in the development of the individual. Vygotsky posits that learning is embedded and inherent within social events that occur when an individual interacts with people, objects and events in his or her culture and environment. Language learning thus does not occur in the minds of learners in an isolated or detached process. Instead, it is inextricably intertwined with the social context in which the learner operates and communicates (Leki, 2007).

The theory, with its social and cultural underpinnings is integral to the scope of this study because this study is confined to how peers and cultural tools lend support among Malay learners. Vygotsky's ideas are relevant because he believed that human activities occur in cultural settings, whereby culture is inextricably intertwined and inherent in human actions and reactions. Therefore, learners' specific mental structures and processes can be traced to their interactions with others (Woolfolk, 2001). These shared activities enable knowledge and higher mental processes to be co-constructed. This inter psychological phase is followed by the intra psychological phase where the learner internalises his or her cognitive processes to regulate his or her own learning, hence autonomy in learning. The theory stresses that cognitive development is fostered via social sources of individual thinking as well as cultural tools which provide information and support necessary for meaningful learning. In developing autonomy in vocabulary learning within the scope of this theory, peer support plays a significant role in helping learners acquire vocabulary.

The social sources refer to interactions with people who are cognitively superior to the learner, such as parents, teachers, other adults and also their peers, who are more capable. These interactions serve to enhance the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Scott & Palinscar, 2013). The construct of ZPD was introduced by Vygotsky (1978), which refers to the phase in which a learner is able to accomplish learning

goals with the support and guidance of superiors, instead of working entirely on his or her own. Through peer interactions and shared activities, learners are able to construct knowledge, form specific mental structures and experience higher mental processes as these interactions stimulate learners' ZPD. The realisation of learners' ZPD in the Socio Cultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) in turn, ensures learner autonomy. Autonomy is fostered when the learner is able to internalise his or her cognitive processes through inter psychological phase of social interactions with peers as well as intra psychological phase to regulate his or her learning

behaviours. The intra psychological phase is facilitated and supported with the use of cultural tools or cultural objects which help to regulate autonomous learning behaviours. Vygotsky (1981, cited in Scott & Palinscar, 2013) identifies cultural tools or semiotics to include various means like language, systems of counting, mnemonic techniques, algebraic symbol systems, works of art, writing, schemes, diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings, and conventional signs. These tools facilitate the co-construction of knowledge and are the means that are internalised to aid future independent learning (Scott & Palinscar, 2013).

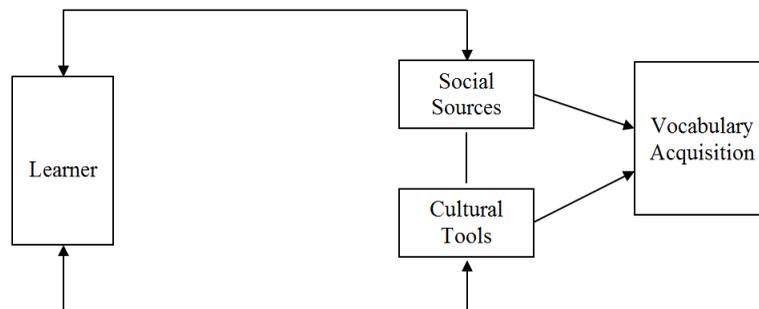


Figure 1. Framework for Vocabulary Acquisition in the Socio Cultural Theory

In lexical learning, word meanings are generalisations of each person's thinking and each word is akin to a microcosm of human consciousness. In light of this, vocabulary learning is certainly a social act by nature in that it occurs through observations about how people communicate with each other and through engagement in communication. Nevertheless, it is the individual who

essentially decides the type, quality and how much communication he or she is willing to make, thus establishing a unique semantic space and his or her individualised own word meanings, subject to own purposes and environments. Schmitt (2000) points out that group work, such as cooperative group learning, is useful for vocabulary learning because the social context of cooperative learning enhances learners'

motivation to learn words. Wilkinson (1994, cited in Knezovich, Tierney, & Wright, 1999) says that cooperative learning activities, combined with story groups can liven up vocabulary learning as it is able to stimulate brainstorming, reinforces vocabulary items and assists shy learners to open up and develop confidence in classroom participation. Consequently, autonomy is established via interaction with significant others such as peers.

### **Dictionary as a Cultural Tool**

The role of dictionary, a determination strategy is referred to as a cultural tool in the Socio Cultural Theory. The dictionary can be a monolingual dictionary, a bilingual dictionary or an electric one. Opinions on the use of dictionaries are somewhat divided. Many studies do support the efficacy of the various types of dictionaries (monolingual, bilingual, electronic) as a useful vocabulary learning strategy. In the Malaysian context, on the whole, the use of dictionary has been advocated and many studies have found dictionaries to be a useful resource in helping learners (Naginder & Abdullah 2007; Mokhtar, Mohd Rawian, Yahaya, & Abdullah, 2009), especially the use of monolingual dictionaries (Paramjeet, 2004; Zakaria, 2005). Similarly, in the foreign contexts, Hamzah, Kafipour and Abdullah (2009), Lew (2000, cited in Zarei, 2010) and Minh (2009) also found monolingual dictionaries to be the most highly used strategy. Other

studies have found bilingual dictionaries to be more effective than monolingual dictionaries. For example, Schmitt (1997) found the bilingual dictionary to be the most widely tapped strategy among the 40 vocabulary learning strategies, while Zarei (2010) also found bilingual dictionaries to be superior over monolingual dictionaries. As for electronic dictionaries, Torres and Ramos (2003) have found these to foster learner independence in vocabulary acquisition.

Although the usefulness of various types of dictionaries has been proven in many studies, a few proponents have raised concerns as the use of dictionaries is in conflict with the depth of information processing (DOP) hypothesis. DOP involves shallow processing and the word meaning is discovered easily, thus a hindrance to word retention (Laufer & Hill, 2000). This is also illustrated by Brown (1994) who provides four guidelines about vocabulary teaching and learning. Firstly, he posits that teachers should allocate specific class time to vocabulary learning. He also states that learners should be helped to learn vocabulary in context (contextualised learning / incidental learning) within a communicative framework. Brown's third guideline downplays the role of bilingual dictionaries, since such practices of referring to dictionaries rarely help learners to internalise words for later recall and use. Lastly and more importantly, he advocates that learners develop strategies for decoding the meaning of words, that is, by becoming autonomous learners.

Thus, in striving to become autonomous vocabulary learners, the dictionary can / may pose obstruction along the way.

## METHODOLOGY

This research was an exploratory case study, carried out among a very small group of Malay ESL (English as a Second language) learners at an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The qualitative research paradigm was adopted, whereby a group of case study participants were selected purposefully to become the subjects of the study. There were three males and three females of varying language proficiency - high, average and low language ability. There were two participants for each language level. Participants of different language ability were selected to obtain insights into how learners of varying proficiency levels coped with their peers and tapped on the tools of learning. Their language ability was determined by their performance and grades obtained in the two English language courses they had pursued in the previous semester at the university. The categorisation of the participants' language ability is shown below.

Table 1  
*Classification of Participants' English Language Ability*

Learner Grades		
High Ability Learners' Grades	Average Ability Learners' Grades	Low Ability Learners' Grades
A	B+	C
A-	B	C+
	B-	

The study is limited in its breadth, as only six participants were selected. This is because the researcher wanted to ensure that the class, comprising approximately 30 students had equal representation of males and females for the three language proficiency levels. As the sampling was purposeful, therefore, only six students (males and females equally divided) were selected. There was limited number of boys in the class, majority of whom were average ability learners. However, a small group of participants also enabled the researcher to probe deep into the phenomenon being studied, through the data collection procedures.

These participants were pursuing a 3-credit-hour English language course, of six contact hours a week. The course was designed to prepare students for the Malaysian University English Test (MUET); therefore, it primarily built on and further developed the major aspects of language skills, namely, reading, writing, listening, speaking and grammar skills. As a skills-based language course, learners practised and integrated language skills in meaningful tasks relevant to academic contexts, as stated in the course syllabus. The materials reflected issues such as social problems, economics, nation-building and other issues pertinent to academic English and topics commonly discussed in the MUET. The materials were based primarily on the class lecturers' choice and discretion. It is noteworthy to mention that the course syllabus and course outline did not make any specific reference

nor explicitly stipulated the learning of vocabulary to enhance language skills. Therefore, it was (logically) expected that the lecturers have the initiative and creativity in devising language activities that would further develop and reinforce the learning and retention of vocabulary items within the course.

The study was carried out for four weeks, during which the participants wrote their daily language learning experiences. They reflected on their learning experiences with their peers as well as the cultural tools which were probed in the study. Brief guidelines were given to help the participants focus their thoughts and reflect on specific areas and issues in learning. Dymont and O'Connell (2003) uphold the benefits of journal writing because it is a means to enable learners to "record a concrete experience, reflect on and record their observations about the experience, integrate the observation into abstract concepts or theories, and use the theories to make decisions or solve problems." The participants were required to make daily notes and jot their feelings and emotional reactions to the phases of learning (before, during and after lessons). They were required to submit their entries to the researcher every week to enable the researcher to use the information and identify gaps to probe their learning processes further via retrospective interviews. The participants were also encouraged to stretch their thoughts and to write further than the guidelines. They were allowed to use any format found suitable

and had the leeway to write their thoughts and reflections in the Malay language too, if they wished. They were expected to write between several paragraphs to even a page or beyond to express themselves effectively.

The participants' reflections were further carried out during weekly interviews with the researcher, where they shared their experiences of learning with, and from peers. The interviews were retrospective self-reports, which were quite open ended in that there was no limit on what learners said in response to a question or statement in a general way. The researcher conducted weekly retrospective interviews with the case study participants in order to extract information about their actions and feelings when learning with their peers, problems encountered, techniques resorted to (tools used) in order to tackle these problems when learning lexical items within the particular week. Question topics or wordings were left unstructured and were not predetermined by use of an interview guide, as Borg and Gall (1989) postulate that the unstructured interview procedure best suits the qualitative research paradigm. The interviews were of informal conversational nature (Best & Kahn, 1993), as the questions and dialogue emerged from the immediate context and ensued in the natural course of things. When conducting the interviews, the factors of peer learning and the use of cultural tools were in focus when eliciting responses.

The course lecturer, a female was the key informant who provided valuable

insights into how the learning of lexical items took place. She took down field notes of the pre, during and after stage of classroom learning, which were perused by the researcher. Her daily reflections were also recorded and all these were shared with the researcher through weekly interviews. In establishing the validity of the data from the participants, particularly information regarding their observable learning behaviours with peers, the data was triangulated with the input provided by the class lecturer. The interviews were generally open ended too, as were the interviews with the participants. However, for the key informant interviews, the researcher prepared a weekly brief guideline in asking questions that focused on the variables to probe. The questions were mainly “Wh” type to enable the lecturer to expand her responses sufficiently. Before the interview, these questions were re-checked to ensure there were no leading or double-barrelled questions. All in all, the data for this study were obtained through non-obtrusive means, whereby the researcher remained as non-participant and impartial.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **How do peers support autonomous learning of lexical items in the Malay culture?**

It appears that peer learning has a strong and positive effect on all the six participants’ affective states. All the learners from varying language ability explained at the interview that when doing activities with

peers, they were able to learn words from friends in a relaxed and non-threatening atmosphere because “we can understand the language they are use - the words they use.” Peer learning enhances affective states because learners are able to share ideas, thoughts as well as the enjoyment derived in learning. Consequently, they try to use these words in subsequent writing activities. An example of testimony by an average ability learner to express the strong support received from peers is related, as follows:

*... we enjoy because everyone take part to contribute the idea, and then, when we need to present, we are free to give idea and then to support. So, each person can, you know, can have the idea from the friend. So, we can know and share the words that I do not understand and then my friend will give and contribute the what words I want to say.*

The learners’ assertions were complemented by the lecturer, who confirmed that the participants found group speaking activities to be less intimidating. She observed that even the less proficient learners could be seen participating actively, since the students got to pick their own group members. Among their close friends they were less shy, and did not seem to mind when another group member disagreed with them. In fact, arguing for their points made the activity more enjoyable and they seemed to have fun-filled discussions.

One scenario recalled by the lecturer is when the group was made up of mostly low ability learners. In this scenario, the learner who had 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 understood and agreed 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 felt more relaxed and uninhibited. Although they stopped midway in the speaking exercise, the support received from peers helped in getting the group discussion through. Again, it is seen that peers play an instrumental role in assisting the weak learners achieve their learning goals, as stipulated in the Socio Cultural Theory.

An average ability participant further stated that "sometimes, on discussion together between lecturer and student can gain me a new vocabulary that come out by my friends." These are echoes to Nithy's (2010) call that:

*Schools should be places where our learners could immerse themselves into environments where they could learn to be, among others, decision makers who are morally and ethically upright, effective communicators, more vocal and risk takers (p. E18).*

Activities such as role plays and simulations are the natural (unforced) backdrop for the realisation of these values through the experience derived from

communication. As tactile-kinesthetic learners, their preference for group learning in this study is in support of Guo and Zhang (2004) who also found Chinese learners subscribing to group learning as more able to enhance learner autonomy. However, these findings are opposed to the findings reported by Giang (2010) and Minh (2009) who found many Vietnamese learners (68%) to learn best individually and by themselves. Vietnamese learners resist assigned pair work or group work but prefer independent discussion and informal conferrals with peers, instead of pre-arranged group tasks. Therefore, learning, being a social enterprise, as postulated by the Socio Cultural Theory is highly prevalent in the Malay culture.

It is a noteworthy observation that these learners place a very high preference for learning vocabulary through social resources or social strategies due to their cultural underpinnings (of group work preference), in contrast to learners of other cultures such as Vietnamese learners (Minh, 2009) and Iranian learners (Hamzah et al., 2009) who have been reported to tap on social strategies, that is, their peers or teachers as the least preferred mode of learning. Similarly, Chinese tertiary learners in Malaysia (proficient and less proficient learners) have also been found to place social strategies as their lowest ranked and least preferred strategies in vocabulary learning (Tuluhong, 2006).

As "authors of their own worlds" (Mohd Adnan, 2006, p. 53), it was also noted that the participants displayed autonomy by

tapping on their peers in and out of class more than their lecturer. The lecturer also confirmed this: "It is seldom that someone would call me for help when faced with difficulty." It appears that Malaysian learners prefer conferring with their peers to instructors, as a study conducted by Hamzah et al. (2009) also found that asking the teacher to check for definition was the least preferred strategy (mean=1.66). All the participants, regardless of their language ability, acknowledged the importance of the role of peers in helping them learn. For example, the lower language ability learners, constantly conferred with other high ability learners, who are either their roommates, or those who stay across their rooms, instead of approaching their lecturer for help.

#### **How does the use of dictionary support autonomous learning of lexical items?**

In terms of lexical learning, all the participants said that they resorted to the dictionary as the main source for help. This finding is similar to the findings obtained by Mokhtar et al. (2009) at the same institution, who tested seven types of strategies. They also found their respondents to tap on the dictionary as the best vocabulary learning strategy, hence "passive strategy users", as defined by Gu and Johnson (1996). Both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries were referred to by the participants. Bilingual dictionary (English-Malay) was particularly sought by most participants when working on the handouts and in doing writing and reading

tasks. One of the participants related in his journal in week two, a learning experience of how the bilingual dictionary helped him:

*I feel confuse because I don't know the meaning in Malay. Then, I try to search the meaning in the dictionary, then after know the meaning I feel confident ... to make me understand, I have to find the meaning first.*

The participants admitted they used bilingual dictionaries more frequently, even though their lecturers in the previous semesters had made it compulsory for them to own a monolingual dictionary. This is similar to Schmitt (1997), who also found bilingual dictionary as the most widely used strategy among English as second language (ESL) learners even though its role is downplayed by Brown (1994).

The dictionary was deemed an important source by all the participants and most would rely on it each time they needed to find out meaning of words, especially if their peers were not available or were unable to help. For example, one average ability learner and one low ability participant related and explained how they learnt the meaning of "recapitulate" and "delinquent acts" by resorting to the dictionary. Another low ability participant said he referred to the dictionary this semester a lot more than previous semesters because "*Kita naik Part II, Part III, Part IV, kita lagi naik, kita kena kuasai lebih banyak (perkataan).*" (Translation: As we

progress from Part I to Part II, Part III, and Part IV, we need to have mastery of more words).

Other participants preferred monolingual (English-English) dictionary. Choice of using monolingual or bilingual dictionary was not determined by learners' language ability, but rather on their own choices and preferences. Regardless of the type of dictionary used, this finding is congruent with other studies (discussed in the literature earlier) which reported dictionary use as the main source of learning.

Despite their huge preference for dictionary use, the lecturer observed that only two participants regularly brought dictionaries to class. Other learners found the meanings of words by asking each other or referring to the dictionary when they returned to the hostels. The reason given for not bringing the dictionary to class was its weight (all learners were required to purchase a Longman Dictionary in their first semester at the institution). As "passive strategy users" who rely mainly on dictionaries for word comprehension, it shows that the depth of information processing (DOP) hypothesis (see Craik & Lockheart, 1972) is not widely supported in the learning context since dictionaries involve shallow processing whereby word meanings are effortlessly decoded. For long-term retention and acquisition, dictionaries are seen to be a hindrance (Laufer & Hill, 2000). This may be one of the reasons why learners are sometimes not able to recall words previously learnt

in class easily and do not have a persistent memory trace, owing to lack of deeper analysis which involve more cognitive effort and semantic involvements. Most of the time, meaning of words is derived with a crutch, in the form of a dictionary.

### **How does guessing meaning in context support autonomous learning of lexical items?**

One praiseworthy observation is learners' ability or effort in guessing meaning in context, which was also the second best strategy use reported by Minh (2009) among Vietnamese learners. This form of awareness enables meaning to be transformed and serves as an "information processor" (Ng, 1995, p. 2) by linking information in the environment to previous knowledge. According to the lecturer, affixes and parts of speech are regularly reviewed in the lessons to teach learners ways to guess meanings of words. Therefore, when reading a text containing words with affixes, the participants can easily guess the meaning, provided they know the meaning of the base word. Then, the new word they say, would probably be the opposite or related in some way (for example, "de-powered"). By reading the context, they can guess the meaning correctly. Two participants noted in their journals about contextual guessing as a means of deriving the meaning of unknown words. The lecturer was particularly encouraged to learn that the participants could guess the meaning of "ordeal" effectively from the context. The same

goes with the different parts of speech. Guessing the meaning may not be too difficult but the real test is being able to use the correct form when speaking or writing.

However, at times, learners are able to point out words that have similar meanings in a text while in some other contexts, they fail to do so. Once, while going through a listening tape script, the class came across the word “collapse” - not a very difficult word. The students were asked to find another word in the same short paragraph that has similar meaning. The participants said they simply shouted out some words that would not make complete sense to the sentence when substituted with the word “collapse”, indicating lack of reading skill of guessing meaning in context. Only one high ability female participant contented to have been able to locate the word “topple” correctly.

Among all the interviewees, this participant was particularly noted (by the lecturer) to guess meanings of words in context, especially when the lecturer pointed out clues; she was quick to respond compared to the rest. This is confirmed by her self-admission of making conscious effort in guessing meanings in context, instead of looking up the dictionary whenever she is curious about unknown words. Like her, another high ability male student also said he would try to guess the meaning of unknown words from context as he hated to “open the dictionary” every time he came across unknown vocabulary. Accordingly, he referred to the dictionary

only once in the study to know the meaning of “emblazoned”, as it appeared in the lyrics of a song used in class.

When guessing in context is attempted, it is usually confined to simple affixes and does not involve deeper analysis of lexical input, such as anaphoric or cataphoric references in decoding lexical meanings. The participants are similar to the participants of Nambiar, Ibrahim and Krish (2008) who found Malaysian learners to tap on basic learning strategies that do not require analytical or critical thought processes. Therefore, the vicious cycle is reinforced with the turnover of the semester. For example, when coping with unknown vocabulary, a female weak ability learner said she would first and foremost guess the meaning in context. However, more often than not, it would be a futile effort and she would either consult her friend or the dictionary, whichever is available at the time.

These findings also suggest that the higher ability learners have a higher level of consciousness about contextual learning, similar to the findings obtained by Ahmed (1989) and Sanaoui (1995) whose respondents were able to derive meanings of unknown vocabulary using contextual clues more successfully than their weaker peers. For example, one high ability learner related that he was able to learn the meaning of “frowns” from context, “The officer frowns and asks the boy, “Young man, are you kidding?” He was able to derive the meaning with further aid of anaphoric and cataphoric references,

which showed the man's mood and state of mind. These efforts are to be lauded as the learners are making an effort in relating to the DOP model through deeper engagement with input, and ensuring successful word acquisition. Learners' cognitive efforts of deeper levels of semantic processing make learning of target words more effective, hence in support of autonomous learning.

Besides guessing meaning in context, translation method has also been employed by almost all the participants who write the equivalent terms of unknown vocabulary in the Malay language in the handouts. When asked why they wrote in Malay instead of English, the participants explained in unison that it was fast, easy and easily understood compared to writing the synonym in English, which may not necessarily be correct. This corresponds with Ibrahim, Ariffin, & Osman's (2008) findings of learners' heavy reliance on the Malay language when trying to comprehend English texts.

## CONCLUSION

The present case study is limited in its breadth and reach, since it involves a small number of participants, therefore, the findings are not generalisable to the entire population. We can nevertheless draw worthwhile patterns and cues from the findings derived from the study. In learners' efforts in becoming autonomous, they seem to place a lot of importance on their peers and friends, as significant others, both in the classroom (via pair work activities, group discussions and tasks) and out of classroom

(via social interactions). It is not possible to attain autonomy without acknowledging the essential and instrumental role played by peers and friends. This study found that social resources and social strategies are important to learners of Malay origin. The spirit of kinship and acknowledgement of one's contribution to the larger community is highly prevalent in the Malay culture. As the study proved, learning lexical items with the backdrop of the Socio Cultural Theory and the socio-cultural context of the Malay community is a catalyst in boosting and enhancing learner autonomy. Learners in this study are seen to readily display positive attitudes and take optimum opportunities in learning in the spirit of collaboration and cooperation with their peers, a 'mirror image' in which their daily activities are carried out.

In enhancing Malay learners' preference for group learning, educators should devise and execute vocabulary lessons in ways that incorporate collective learning like vocabulary games, group discussions, role plays, and other problem solving activities which foster group interaction.

The teaching of vocabulary through explicit means is feasible for the first 2,000 words of English which require individual attention, as postulated by Nation (1983, cited in Minh, 2009). Beyond that stage, teaching of vocabulary items should be directed to teaching learners to use tools and strategies effectively. This study shows that the participants were not fully proficient in using the tool of guessing meaning in context. Ranjit and Embi (2007) explain:

*We need to understand the fact that very few learners are spontaneously self-directed or autonomous. Therefore, it is the responsibility of educators to systematically guide and provide learners the skills and knowledge through learner training programs on how they can learn to take responsibility for their own learning (pp. 109-110).*

With sufficient training in this area of learning, independence can be garnered as the learner is able to function autonomously by tapping on the right tools and resources in lexical learning.

This study was conducted in a mono-cultural setting in an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. As such, the conclusions drawn from the qualitative data are within the parameters of the institution and participants being studied and cannot be generalised to other institutional settings and contexts. Hence, a further study involving multicultural comparisons can be conducted by collecting data from different ethnic groups studying at various tertiary institutions in Malaysia.

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