Students' Evaluation of their English Language Learning Experience

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Abstract

In the field of English language teaching and learning, there is a long history of investigating students' performance while they are undergoing specific learning programmes. This research study, however, focused on students' evaluation of their English language learning experience after they have completed their programme. The data were gathered from 20 semi-structured interviews with 10 'good' students and 10 'weak' students emphasizing on factors which contributed to their proficiency level, preferred teaching approaches and learning strategies as well as their overall learning experience. The qualitative analysis indicated some different views between the 'good' and the 'weak' students in terms of their proficiency level and the contributing factors to their success (or lack of) in learning English. They however, shared similar opinion on preferred teaching approaches, learning strategies and classroom experience. The results have implications for pedagogy as they highlight some insights which may facilitate success in English language learning.

Keywords: language learning; learning strategies; students' evaluation

A. Introduction

In the field of English language teaching and learning, there is a long history of investigating students' performance while they are undergoing specific learning programmes – a process and product research. Following this trend are research studies focusing on, for example, effective techniques and methods (Schuetze, 2015; Wei, 2015; Shintani, 2013) as well as effective learning strategies (Yeldham & Gruba, 2016; Graham et.al, 2010; Chen, 2009). While these investigations proved to be beneficial, the data presented were limited to the specific tasks in focus. For instance, Schuetze (2015) discovered that spacing technique (the process) helped students gain vocabulary for both short-term and long-term memory (the product). The specific process was designed specifically to measure its effectiveness on a chosen group of products.

In this research study, instead of focusing on the process and the product, we intend to look at only the product – students learning outcomes which position them as 'good' and 'weak' students – their thinking and their accounts of practice with regards to the followings:

a) their proficiency level;
b) factors that contributed to their proficiency level;
c) preferred teaching approaches;
d) preferred learning strategies; and
e) preferred classroom learning experience.

B. Literature Review

In many countries, second or foreign language learning normally comes in the form of a formal programme in schools or higher learning institutions. The programmes adapt various approaches to language teaching and learning such as the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT). In Malaysia for example, the prescribed syllabus document specifies that the teaching and learning of English should focus on developing students' communicative ability and attention to linguistic forms is to aid communication (Curriculum Specifications, 2003). One of the main issues related to CLT is the focus on form (FoF) practice (Spada & Lightbown, 2008; Loewen, 2005; Ellis et.al, 2002). Ellis et.al (2002) define 'focus-on-form' (FoF) as "… the treatment of linguistic form in the context of performing a communicative task" (p1). According to them, whenever the needs arise, teachers should shift their attention from the communicative activities to some linguistic features – grammar, lexical, phonological. FoF practice emphasises the communicative purposes of learning a language. This is the opposite of 'Focus on formS' (FoFs) practice that stresses students' ability to produce language that is grammatically correct without any regards to students' communicative ability (Long & Robinson, 1998). The teachers' focus in the language classrooms would affect students' overall view of what is important. For example, if teachers stresses the teaching of grammar in the classrooms, it is quite natural for the students to also pay a lot of attention on their grammatical accuracy. A study by Su (2016) discovered that, the majority of her participants prioritised learning grammar because a strong emphasis was put on their ability to master English grammatical rules in the secondary school.

Another important area in language teaching and learning is students' learning strategies (Griffiths, 2015; Oxford, 2011; Chamot, 2004, Rubin, 1975). It is argued by these scholars that successful language learners employ various strategies which can be

taught especially to less successful students. Even though there is no consensus on the definition of learning strategies, Griffiths (2015) posits that "… *strategy* remains a useful concept since it refers to how learners go about learning, and it provides teachers with a potential tool for helping their learners to learn more effectively" (p426). According to Rubin (1975) good language learners tend to engage in the following learning strategies:

- guessing/inferring
- communicating
- managing inhibitions
- attending to form
- practising
- monitoring one's own speech and the speech of others
- attending to meaning.

The identification of these strategies indicate that to succeed, language learners need to be proactive and failure to do so, may result in a less successful experience.

As mentioned earlier, many research studies have been conducted on various issues regarding teaching approaches or techniques as well as students' learning strategies. On the issues of FoF and FoFs practices for example, a study by File & Adams, (2010) discovered that an explicit FoF practice on vocabulary helped students to increase their rate of learning and retaining vocabulary knowledge.

Similarly, an investigation on children's incidental grammar acquisition of two grammatical features, plural *-s* and copula *be* in two types of instruction – focus on form (FonF) and focus on forms (FonFs) – by Shintani (2013), revealed that the FonFs instruction failed to yield any desirable results. The FonF instructions however, showed that even though the students failed to grasp the concept of copula *be,* they were able to acquire the plural *-s* feature.

In investigating learning strategies, Yeldham & Gruba (2016) examined the longitudinal progress of four Taiwanese EFL learners who participated in a course which combined direct instruction of strategies with their practice embedded in the class listening texts. At the end of this study, the students managed to develop a greater ability to use and select various strategies for their listening skills . This proved that specific instructions on learning strategies may help students to become better language learners.

Unlike the study by Yeldham & Gruba (2016), another research on learning strategies by Graham, et.al (2010) proved that similar to low proficiency students, higher proficiency students did not always employ effective learning strategies in their French as an L2 listening class. Because of this, there was a need for a new approach to listening pedagogy and research which included strategy instruction, bottom-up skill development and an inclusion of the role of linguistic knowledge in strategy use.

The discussions on the various teaching methods and approaches as well as learning strategies lead to one question. How much impact have they got on students' performance beyond the stipulated time of the research? It would be pivotal to investigate how students who have completed an English language programme evaluate various aspects of their experience including their proficiency level and the effects of issues such as approaches and strategies on their overall success. The students' evaluation would shed some lights on the elements of language teaching practice which are significant to the students. Comparing the 'good' and the 'weak' students would enable us to underline the

reasons which may explain why some students are successful at learning English when others are not.

C. Context and Participants

This study was conducted in a Malaysian university. It involved 20 third year undergraduate students (aged between 20-22 years old). 10 of these students majored in English. They spoke and wrote fluently in English. For the purpose of this research study, they were categorized as 'good' students. The other 10 students majored in Malay language and were attending English remedial classes in the university. In this research study, they were categorized as 'weak' students.

The participants were chosen based on their level of English language proficiency. All of them volunteered to be interviewed after emails were sent to all students in their respective programmes. The email informed the students about the purpose of the research study. Initially, 26 students agreed to participate – 14 'good' students and 12 'weak' students. However, four of the good students decided to withdraw as they were not able to meet the schedule for the interviews. Two of the 'weak' students did not want to continue their participation as they were not comfortable talking about their experience in learning English.

Before entering the university, all 20 of them went to government schools and they all learned English based on a standardized syllabus which adapts a CLT approach. We viewed these students as the end products of the Malaysian ESL teaching and learning programme that spans for 11 years. These students learned English in school from the age of 7 until the age of 17. The 'good' and the 'weak' students represent the two different spectra of the end products of a language teaching and learning programme. While the 'good' students were the successful ones, the 'weak' students were evidences that some might not be able to achieve the learning outcomes set for the programme. Comparing the responses from the 'good' and the 'weak' students enable us to determine the similarities and differences of their learning experience.

D. Research Methodology

The main data collection method for this research study was semi-structured individual interviews with the 20 participants. Each interview lasted between 20 – 30 minutes. According to Kvale (1996), a semi-structured interview,

> "…has a sequence of themes to be covered as well as suggested questions. Yet at the same time there is an openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the subjects." (p124)

A semistructured interview allows us to explore issues which emerge during the conversation. In other words, instead of focusing only on discovering answers to specific questions, we are also able to delve further into other related issues that could enrich the data of the study. The semistructured interviews we conducted for this research study allowed us to explore students' evaluation of their performance in English without having to adhere to a list of specific questions prepared in advance. In preparation for the interviews, we had the following five main guiding questions:

a) How do you rate your English proficiency level?
b) What does being good in English mean?
c) What contributes to the current English language proficiency level?
d) What are your preferred teaching approach and learning strategies?
e) Is there anything you would change about the way you learned English in school?

For the 'good' students, the interviews were conducted in English. However, for the 'weak' students, the interviews were conducted in Malay. The decision to interview the 'weak' students in Malay was made based on the fact that none of them could converse in English well. Interviews in Malay would reduce their anxiety.
All of the interviews were audio-recorded. The analysis started with the transcription of each interview data set. Based on the main guiding interview questions, we categorised each response by the students under the following codings:

a) students' evaluation of their proficiency level;
b) factors that contributed to their proficiency level;
c) preferred teaching approaches;
d) preferred learning strategies; and
e) preferred classroom learning experience.

For the purpose of the discussion on the data in this paper, the 'weak' students' responses were translated into English.

E. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this research study can be summarized as follows:

Table 1: The summary of the research findings

'Good' students	'Weak' students
Rated themselves based on their knowledge of vocabulary. Vocabulary was the key to good command of English. Grammar would be acquired subconsciously through exposure to the language.	Rated themselves based on their knowledge of grammar. Grammar was the key to good command of English. Grammar must be learned to be good in English.
Success in learning English was the results of various external factors such as interest in pop culture, family background and teacher/peer influence	English was learned exclusively in the classroom without much interest to explore beyond it.
No recollection of any teaching approaches/methods/techniques in the classroom deemed effective	No recollection of any teaching approaches/methods/techniques in the classroom deemed effective.
No specific learning strategies employed in learning English.	No specific learning strategies employed in learning English.
English lessons in school should have been casual rather than very structural.	English lessons in school should have been casual rather than very structural.

The summary above suggests that 'good' and 'weak' students had different views in terms of self evaluation as well as the factors that contributed to their level of English language proficiency. However, they shared similar opinion regarding effective teaching methods, learning strategies and suitable learning environment.

1. Students' evaluation of their proficiency level

All ten 'good' students claimed that their English was good as they were able to communicate well in English. The 'weak' students, on the other hand, rated their English as very poor because they did not understand much English. The interviews revealed that the 'good' and the 'weak' students evaluated themselves based on two totally different basis. While the 'good' students rated their English proficiency level based on their vocabulary knowledge, the 'weak' students used grammar knowledge as the mean to measure their proficiency level.

One of the 'good' students claimed,

> To communicate, to use English, we need vocabulary. A lot of vocabulary. The more words I know, the better. All people who are good in English, that I know, their vocabulary is very vast. That's what I want to be too. To know more vocabulary so I can become better.

The above response stipulated the importance of vocabulary in determining one's level of proficiency. However, the response from one of the 'weak' students painted a different picture. He stated,

> I don't speak English. I don't really understand English. I think, I cannot speak English because of my grammar. I am not good in (English) grammar. When I try (to speak in English), I'm not sure if my grammar is right or wrong. I'm afraid that if my grammar is wrong, people don't understand me, or laugh at me.

The two contrasting evaluations suggest two contrasting views on what constitutes good command of English. The 'good' student believed that her ability to use the English language was the result of her knowledge of vocabulary. The 'weak' student however, thought that his limited ability to use English was caused by his lack of grammar knowledge.

The essential role which the vocabulary knowledge plays on the students' ability to use English was described by another 'good' student who said,

> Vocabulary means I can express myself better. I can also explain better. When I read or listen, I will understand better and easier if I know, understand a lot of words. I think many problems in communicating happen because I don't understand the meaning of some words. Vocabulary is related to comprehension. For example, if you ask me a question and I don't understand a word or two in the question, I won't be able to answer.

On a different note, a 'weak' student described the importance of grammar as,

> Grammar means what I say or write is correct. It is important because if my grammar is wrong, then I don't have the confidence. I need to make sure my grammar is right first, then I become more confident. If I'm not sure, I prefer not to use English at all. So that's why I think I need to learn grammar. Everytime I write in English, I always think, if this is right or wrong – most of the time, it's wrong – and this makes me not want to use English.

The above two accounts indicate two distinguished views about the use of English language. To the 'good' student, vocabulary was the key to ensure that she was able to become a better English language user. The 'weak' student, on the other hand, seemed to believe that knowledge of grammar would ensure an accurate production of the language which to her, was very important. Unlike the 'weak' students, throughout the interviews, all of the 'good' students rarely mentioned about the correct use of English. They had the tendency to focus on comprehensible production of the English language which according to Rubin (1975) is typical with good students. In other words, while the 'good' students emphasised the fluency aspect of the English language use, the 'weak' students' emphasis was on the accuracy of the language production. It may also be suggested that the 'good' students were the proponents of FoF practice (Spada & Lightbown, 2008; Ellis et.al, 2002). The 'weak' students' preference, on the other hand, seemed to incline towards the FoFs practice (Long & Robinson, 1998).

The focus on accuracy was reflected in all of the interviews with the 'weak' students. One of them mentioned,

> Grammar is something I must learn to be good in English. In school, what I learned in the English class was grammar. I learned other things as well, reading, writing, but to me, the most important thing I have to learn is grammar. I need to learn grammar first.

This account on the need to learn grammar was in contrast with the comment made by a 'good' student who stated,

> Grammar is also important but vocabulary is the most important. Grammar will come along, naturally, I guess. That's what happened to me. I notice that, some grammar rules, I just know them. I don't check grammar rules all the time. I don't think I need to focus too much on learning grammar because if I read a lot, I will know the grammar rules.

Based on the revelation by the 'weak' student, it may be suggested that to him, grammar was the kind of knowledge which must be learned formally. On the other hand, the 'good' student seemed to posit that grammar knowledge was a skill which could be acquired, naturally. The 'weak' students' fixation with grammar contradicts Rubin's (1975) claim that attention to form is a trait of successful language learners. However, there is a possibility that these 'weak' students may have been exposed to an extensive amount of grammar teaching which led them to believe in the importance of grammar for language acquisition (Su, 2016).

The stark differences between the 'good' and the 'week' students' evaluation of their English language skills demonstrate that even though students underwent the same teaching and learning programme, they might form two totally different perspectives.

2. Factors that contributed to students' proficiency level

The two contrasting evaluation between 'good' and 'weak' students led to the investigations on the factors that contributed to their proficiency level. Six of the ten 'good' students contributed their success in learning English to their family background. Two of them, claimed that their success was the result of their interest in 'pop' culture. The remaining two students contributed their success in learning English to their teacher and peers.

One of the 'good' students claimed that his success was the result of,

> … my mother's exposure, early exposure. I come from a family that likes English. I mean, encourage us to read and speak in English. I use English to speak to my mother and siblings. So, even before I started going to school, English is already part of my life. I also have a lot of friends who speak English, who like English too. So, it's a plus point for me because I can use English with my friends and that helps me improve, a lot.

The claim above indicated that the English language was ubiquitous in the student's everyday life outside the school hours. The language was already a very familiar feature before he entered school and this contributed to his interest. This, in turn, enhanced his chance to excel in the subject.

Another 'good' student did not have an early exposure to the English language at home. He however, discovered the language through his fascination towards the Japanese 'anime' comic books. He revealed,

> When I was 8 years old, I discovered Japanese anime comic books. I think, this was the turning point. I came from a rural area where nobody speaks English and with very little exposure to English. So I discovered Japanese anime and they only come in two languages, Japanese and English. I had no access to Japanese, so my only option was to learn English so I can understand the story. So that's when I started to really learn English. I became better and better. To me, English is the way to enjoy the comic books. I still read them until today.

Unlike the previous one, this particular student did not grow up in an environment where English was used on a daily basis. His exposure to the language was very limited until he developed an interest to read comic books written in English. The appeal of the comic books motivated him to have a live long interest in the English language.

Another 'good' student had a negative view about the English language until a teacher changed her perception.

> Throughout my school years, I didn't really like English. I thought it was difficult and so boring. Until I was in Form Four*(16 years old)*, I had a new teacher, who graduated from England. He always talked about his experience in England, the places he traveled and I found that very interesting. I liked the way he spoke English and he looked so confident. I wanted to be like him. I started to dream about going to England and speak English fluently. From this point, I think, my English improved a lot.

Based on the above recollection, it may be concluded that the student associated the English language with fascinating places and personality. She did not see English only as a subject learned in school but also as her ticket to explore the world.

Peer pressure is another factor that may contribute to a student's success in learning English. One of the 'good' students recounted,

> My family and I moved to Johor Bharu[1] when I was in Standard 5 *(11 years old)*. In the new school, almost everyone spoke good English. My classmates read English story books, watched English tv programmes and they all knew about the latest English songs. I came from a rural area where there was not much exposure to all these. To be part of the group, I had no choice but to also try to listen to English songs, read English books. It was so depressing at the beginning because I felt so left out and I didn't really understand English. But, the pressure to be accepted, to be part of them, made me try harder. Eventually, I didn't feel so left out anymore because I also listened to English songs and all. My English got better as well and I became as good as my friends.

The description above demonstrated how emulating her new friends' behaviour and interest led to her success in learning English. Even though she did not receive early exposure to the language, she was inspired to improve her English language skills by her peers.

All 'good' students had one similarity. They contributed their success to learning English to various external factors. These external factors propelled them to learn and use English outside the classroom. The 'weak' students, however, described a totally different experience when asked about the contributing factors to their success (or lack of) in learning English. One of them claimed,

> Until today, English is a subject I learn in the classroom. I don't really like English. I don't see why I need to learn English because I live in Malaysia. I don't need to speak English with others.

The above statement indicated that English was viewed only as a subject with no apparent connection to the outside world. This opinion was shared by another 'weak' student who stated,

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[1] An urban city in the south of the Malaysian Peninsular

> I don't see the need to use English except for the exam. It's difficult.
> Most of my friends don't use English as well. So there's no need to
> use English. When I was in school, my English result was C or D,
> just enough. It was okay because I knew I'm not good in English.

The description further demonstrated how limited the use of English to the 'weak' students was. English was learned for the purpose of the examination and getting a good grade was not a priority. This was because he succumbed to the fact that his English was not good.

Another 'weak' student posited,

> English to me, is one of the difficult subjects, like Maths. Outside
> the English class, I don't need English. So I think, I learned English
> because it was compulsory. If I can choose, I may not choose to
> learn English in school.

Comparing English to another difficult subject – Mathematics – was a clear indication that this student viewed the language as nothing more than a school subject which he was forced to learn. He did not harbour any interest in English as he failed to comprehend the need to use it outside his classroom.

Based on the descriptions by both the 'good' and the 'weak' students, we could highlight one main difference between them. While the 'good' students always talked about English beyond the classroom, the 'weak' students' English was always restricted to the four walls of their classrooms. All of the 'good' students learned English so that they could use it for various meaningful purposes. They formed genuine interests and needs to learn English which led to their success. It is interesting to note that none of the 'good' students contributed their success to the experience of learning English in the classrooms. They however, viewed English lessons in school as an enhancement opportunity for them to improve their skills. The 'weak' students on the other hand, did not develop any interest in English. Lessons in the classrooms was the only exposure they had to the language. As English was a difficult subject with no real 'value', the students did not have the motivation to be good in English. This in turn, contributed to their lack of success in learning English.

3. Preferred teaching approaches

Having discussed the contributing factors to their success (or lack of) in learning English, our discussion moved to the students' experience in the classroom. Our main intention was to discover any particular technique or approach employed by the teachers which made a lasting effect on the students. Contrary to many research studies identifying effective techniques to teach various language skills (Schuetze, 2015; Wei, 2015; Shintani, 2013), both 'good' and 'weak' students did not have a recollection of any specific technique deemed effective. One of the 'good' student claimed,

> I like English, so I think, I don't really mind whatever the teachers
> did. I just followed. What I like is reading English books, watching
> English movies and I can do these outside the class. So I didn't really

care what the teachers did as long as I understood what to do and get high marks. If I did reading comprehension, I made sure I answered all questions correctly, used correct words, correct grammar. Got full marks.

The student's comment demonstrated that in the classroom, the most important thing to him was to understand the teacher's instructions so he could score high marks. He did not really pay attention to the technique the teacher used because he liked the English subject which made everything easy for him.

Another 'good' student shared similar view. She stated,

I don't think I prefer any specific methods in learning English. I don't remember any specific techniques my teachers used. We did a lot of reading and writing exercises. A lot of grammar exercises as well. But, really, I don't think I have a preferred method. My concern was to get an A at least. Preferably A+.

Echoing the thought of the first student, attending English lessons was for the purpose of getting a good grade. The teacher's technique or approach was secondary to the ability to score a desirable grade.

Similarly, the 'weak' students were not able to identify any specific methods of teaching used by their teachers in their English classes. One of the 'weak' students recalled his experience in the class as follows,

My teachers, asked us to read, write, that's all I can remember. I didn't quite like my English class because I don't really understand. My teachers had to use the Malay language sometimes to explain things to us. I think, no, I didn't really pay attention to how my teachers teach because, my English is very poor. It's not my favourite subject. I know once I finish school, I didn't have to learn English anymore. So it didn't really matter.

This student viewed English as a difficult subject and any technique or approach used by the teachers would not make any difference to him. Sharing the same point of view, another 'weak' student stated,

All I can remember was how boring and difficult English was. Boring and difficult because I didn't really understand many of the things we had to in the class. The main problem was, I didn't quite know why I had to learn English. So, I think that's why I couldn't remember how my teachers teach.

This student had a 'fixed' view of the English language – boring and difficult – and this clouded her experience in learning it. She was not able to remember how English was taught because she did not really pay attention to what happened in the classroom. This thought was actually shared by all the 'weak' students interviewed. The one thing they seemed to remember was how miserable they were in the English classes.

Both 'good' and 'weak' students were not able to determine any specific technique or method of teaching that helped them to improve their English. Even though they shared the same view on this matter, the reason for it was totally different. The 'good' students failed to identify any specific technique because they were already good in the subject. Therefore, any techniques used would be well received. Their main aim was to gain the best possible grade in the examination. This conforms to Wenden's (1986) claim that very often, students had the tendency to view language classrooms as the place to practice the language. The 'weak' students on the other hand, could not relate to any of the technique employed because English was difficult and there was nothing the teachers could do to change that.

It may be argued that the students might have forgotten their experience in learning English as they had left school for a few years by the time these interviews were conducted. However, we would like to contend that, if any of the technique or method employed by the teacher made an impact, the students would have remembered it – just how one student remembered the teacher who changed her view about English.

4. Preferred learning strategies

Learning strategies employed by the students is one of the main research topic in the field of language teaching and learning (Yeldham & Gruba, 2016; Graham et.al, 2010; Chen, 2009). In this research study, we asked the 'good' and the 'weak' students to talk about specific learning strategies they used to learn English. Apparently, both group of students failed to identify any specific strategy. For example, one of the 'good' students posited,

> For vocabulary, may be my strategy is to check the dictionary, now online dictionary, if I found a word I didn't understand. I cannot say, I have any specific strategy, no. I mean, there were time I checked the dictionary. Besides that, with new words, I also check the part of speech – noun or verb. If it's a noun, for example, I may check what is the plural form. I do things like that but not really all the time. Sometimes I just ignored the word especially if it didn't affect my understanding. For grammar, not really. Like now, everything is online, so it's very easy to check whether something is right or wrong. So, if I'm not sure of a grammar rule, I may check the internet, sometimes I asked my friends, or my lecturers.

The student recalled the strategy she used to learn vocabulary and grammar. She talked at great length about things she did to understand new vocabulary and grammar. However, she also mentioned that this was not a routine. The student's description was rather general without any specific mention of any specific strategy. The pattern of describing strategies employed in a general manner was consistent with all the 'good' students. All of them said almost the same thing – describing ways of learning new words and grammar. Their recollections of their strategies in learning English was best summarised by the following student.

> I remember in one of the courses here *(at the university)*, we learned about learning strategies, and I actually tried to remember, what strategies I used when I was learning English in school, also now. I

> realised that I don't really have any specific strategies. I mean, I did employ some of the strategies, but nothing significant. Even now, I am still learning English but I cannot say definitely that this is my strategy. I cannot. I think I just do whatever that is convenient to me at the time. I think, I can use any strategies I want, it doesn't matter. What's important is that I learn something and able to improve my English. I also think, strategies are something I cannot force myself to do. Even if my friend said this is a good strategy but if I'm not comfortable with it, I won't do it. So to me, anything that works for me. Just do it.

Without referring to any specific strategy, the student described how he would do different things which suited him in order to learn and improve his English. He also mentioned that it was important for him to feel at ease with any of the strategies he intended to use.

Similar to the 'good' students, the 'weak' students were also unable to specify any strategies used to learn English. This is demonstrated by the following reply from one of the 'weak' students.

> Strategies? No, no strategies. Well, sometimes, in the class, if I had to write, I used the Malay-English dictionary to find the word. If I had the dictionary. Most of the time, I just wrote whatever I thought was right. To tell you the truth, I rarely think about English, what I did in the English class, for example. I have to be honest, I didn't really focus too much on English when I was in school, even now. So, it's very difficult for me to think of specific strategies in learning English. May be, if I put more effort, use more dictionary, may be my English is better. I don't know.

In agreement with the 'good' students, this student claimed that she did not remember utilizing any strategies except for the use of a bilingual dictionary in her writing class. She further explained that she did not focus much on her English lessons and that contributed to her inability to recall any specific strategy used. Her view was not in contrast with the views of all the other 'weak' students. Another one of them stipulated,

> How do I learn English? I didn't really learn much I think because it is still bad, until today. When I was in school, my teachers would ask us to use the dictionary to check for words. Sometimes I did, sometimes I didn't because not enough time. Other than that, on my own, I don't think there's any strategies. I didn't read or write in English outside the class. So, I guess there's no need for any strategy. I think I gave up on learning English because it's difficult.

This student believed that there was no urgency to use any strategy because he did not use English outside the classroom. Therefore, there was no pressing need to learn English except for fulfilling the school requirement.

Both groups of students talked about the strategies in a very general way. They mentioned the use of dictionary as well as the online grammar checker. Based on the

students' description, it may be assumed that they employed a cognitive learning strategy where the activity they did was used to enhance their comprehension as well as retention (O'Malley & Chamot,1990).

5. Preferred classroom learning experience

The final part of the interview focused on how the students envisioned an ideal English lesson. Both 'good' and 'weak' student shared similar views on this issue. The following two interview excerpts encapsulate the opinion of the 'good' students about how English should be taught in school.

> I think, what I noticed was, there were two sides of English. One was the fun and real English which I used at home with my family and friends. The other was English I learned in school which was more serious. I didn't have any problems with the kinds of English I learned in school, but sometimes I wished, English in school was more like English at home. I will become an English teacher one day and I know some of my students may not have the early exposure to English they way I had. They will only be exposed to the 'serious' type of English in school. I always think about how do I make English more fun for my students so that they will like English they way I do.

> I remember in school, some of my friends really hated English because they said it was difficult. At that time, I didn't understand what was difficult about English. It was not difficult for me. Now that I am in the TESL programme and I have been involved in some programmes in school, I realised that if a student does not use English at home, they will find English in school difficult. In school, English looks complicated – the grammar, the vocabulary, the pronunciation – they are all complicated. The focus was on getting it right. At home, I was not corrected and nobody cared whether my grammar was correct or my pronunciation was perfect. As long as they understood me, it was fine. So I developed my proficiency naturally. With time, I improved. By the time I went to school, my English was quite good already. So I didn't have many issues when my teachers corrected me. For my classmates who didn't really know English, it was difficult because they were afraid that they got it wrong. So I think, I would like to learn English where it does not look difficult.

All of the 'good' students wished that English lessons in school could demonstrate how interesting the language was. English lessons in school, according to them, should mimic the English language in real life situation. The key to successful English lessons was to enable students, especially the ones with little exposure to the language outside the school, to realise that English was not a difficult subject.

The 'good' students' views resonate with the 'weak' students opinion that English should not be portrayed as a difficult subject. The two excerpts below summarize their views on this matter.

> My roommate now is a TESL students and sometimes I envy her because she understands English. Now I start to learn English, a bit, from her. I think, if in school, English was not that difficult, may be I can also be good in English. I wish, my English classes were not too focus on grammar. I always got corrected, my grammar, so I was afraid to make mistakes. After sometimes, I just gave up. The English I learned in school and the English I learned from my roommate is different. With my roommate, I didn't feel pressured. In the school, I was very pressured. There were so many things I had to remember and in the end, I didn't remember anything.

> One of the reasons why I don't like English was because I don't know why I need to learn it. Nobody speaks English with me. So may be, if in the classrooms, I got to see why I need to learn English, than I like it better. In the class, it was always about getting things right and this made English seem more difficult. If I can see that English is not difficult, English is just like the Malay language, I can understand, may be I can learn better.

All of the 'weak' students recalled learning English in an environment where it was presented as a language of so many rules and regulations which must be mastered. As a result, they lost their interest and resorted to the belief that it was impossible to be good in English. They also did not have the opportunity to experience using English outside the school for real life purposes. All of the 'weak' students wished they had learned English in a context where it was not about being correct all the time.

With regards to ideal English lessons, both 'good' and 'weak' students were in tandem. They believed that English lessons should nurture their interest. They should be more casual rather than too structural. Classes which concentrated on accuracy would send a message to the students that English was a difficult subject.

F. Implications for teaching

The data from the interviews carry some implications for the teaching of English especially in the context where it is taught as a second or foreign language.

Firstly, English lessons should not focus too much on students' grammatical accuracy. All of the 'weak' students found their English lessons too structural which deterred their interest. The 'good' students focus on vocabulary – grammar was an item which could be acquired subconciously as the command of the language improved. Teachers should conduct activities which could enhance students' vocabulary knowledge. This way, students would not see English lesson as too structural and in turn, may encourage them to learn more. Throughout the interviews, the 'weak' students frequently associated English with the word 'difficult'. This perception hinders their chance to be successful in learning the language as beliefs about something would affect one's behaviours (Borg, 2003). We, however do not go to the extent to suggest that grammar

should be cast aside. There is a need to teach grammar as according to Batstone (1994), "Language *without* grammar would certainly leave us seriously handicapped" (p3). He demonstrates how an ungrammatical strings of words (i.e. "up and he that the in Bill Jane stand announce spring marry") does not make sense. This stresses the fact that learning what is considered grammatically correct is important to ensure successful communication. The teachers, however, should not give the impression that the most essential thing about English is the grammar. This is especially important to the students who have limited exposure to the language outside the classrooms. In other words, FoFs practice should be limited as it might hinder students' chance to develop an interest to learn English.

Secondly, during the interview, both 'good' and 'weak' students did not remember any specific methods, techniques or learning strategies which made an impact on their performance in the English classes. However, according to some research, employing appropriate strategies is important to be successful in language learning (Griffiths, 2015,2013,2008; Vandergrift & Tafaghodatari,2010). As such, teachers should encourage students to engage in learning strategies which suit their level and needs. Before the teachers could do this, they nevertheless should first, instill interest in the language. The 'weak' students did not have any recollection of any specific methods or strategies as they struggled to comprehend the need to learn English. The 'good' students, on the other hand, had already developed genuine interest in the language that any methods or strategies used were only additional bonuses.

In relation to our second suggestion above, most importantly, we believe that the focus in the classrooms should be on developing students' genuine interest in the English language. All of the 'good' students had an early exposure to the language or developed an interest which required them to master the language. As such, learning English in school was viewed as an opportunity to further strengthen their acquisition of the language. The 'weak' students, on the other hand, could not master English because they did not have any genuine need or interest to be good in English. It would be absurd to suggest that teachers should focus solely on developing students' interest in learning English. It is a known fact that many teachers are bound by a prescribed syllabus which requires them to teach different elements of the language. We suggest, in addition to the teaching of specific language items, teachers should put some efforts in introducing students to the real aspects of English. They should expose students to the various things they can do and achieve with the knowledge of the language. They may want to demonstrate how English can open various windows to the real world. According to Kramsch (1998), a language can be learned successfully, if it is treated as a 'social tool' where students are engaged in various activities which may assist them to envision how it can be used for real life purposes. Once the students are interested in English, they would embrace any approach, techniques or strategies in the classrooms as demonstrated by the data from the interviews with the 'good' students. Students' preference on a more nurturing classroom environment suggests that the FoF practice would be more desirable compared to the FoFs practice.

G. Conclusion

Breaking from the usual process and product approach to research, we focused on the product – the 'good' and the 'weak' students' evaluation of;

a) their proficiency level;
b) factors that contributed to their proficiency level;
c) preferred teaching approaches;
d) preferred learning strategies; and
e) preferred classroom learning experience.

The interview data suggest that while there were differences in terms of the first two items, they shared similar evaluations on the last three. Based on these, we have made some suggestions which we hope would help to improve the practice of English language teaching and learning.

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