It Takes Two to 'Tangle' for Malay Idioms, but Does It Also Take 'Two' to Learn Them?

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Abstract. Being able to speak idiomatically is a benchmark for measuring one's competence in a language (Ellis, 1997). Malaysia is a multicultural country where the three main races; Malay, Chinese and Indian form the major population. Learning Malay, which is the national language of this country is incomplete without involving the learning of its idioms (*simpulan bahasa*). Having the Malays as the native speakers of Malay in Malaysia may give the non-Malay learners of this language such as the Chinese the opportunity to learn Malay idioms by consulting with the Malays (social strategies). The results of the present study indicated that despite the wide availability of the Malays, in majority, the female Chinese learners of Malay do not prefer to employ social strategies to learn Malay idioms compared to the males as a result of their self-consciousness. Further studies should be conducted to investigate the other factors for such result to appear.

Keywords: Malay Idioms, Chinese Learners, Self-consciousness, Social Strategies.

1. Introduction

Idioms are regarded important in the second language (L2) acquisition, and they also have become one of the toughest areas for second language learners to cope (Cedar, 2004). According to Green (1975), an idiom is difficult to comprehend as it is fixed in expression and is positioned in a specific pattern where the meaning is not derived merely from its individual components. Nevertheless, many second language learners always feel motivated to master the idioms of an L2 in order to resemble the native speakers besides receiving respect and confidence in speaking the particular language (Richards, 1996). As for Malay language (*Bahasa Melayu*), its idiom in Malay is called, *simpulan bahasa*, where *simpulan* means, 'knot or tangle', while *bahasa* means, 'language.' The term, *simpulan bahasa*, if translated literally means, 'the knot or tangle of language.' As its direct translation suggests, *simpulan bahasa* or idiom does 'make a learner's mind tangled' or confused with its combination of two totally unrelated words that carry different meanings as individual chunks. As the saying goes, 'it takes two to tango', however, in the case of Malay idioms, it seems that the saying can be changed into, 'it takes two to tangle.' Nevertheless, the issue in question is whether it takes two (individuals) too to learn Malay idioms. In other words, do the non-Malay learners, specifically Malaysian Chinese interact with the Malay native speakers in learning Malay idioms, or do they prefer to learn the idioms independently?

Learning Malay as a second language via interaction can be referred to employing social strategies. Social strategies, which are a fraction of the indirect strategies in language learning (Oxford, 1990), can play a significant role in understanding a particular language component such as idioms since these strategies involve interacting with the native speakers and obtaining direct information in applying the component in real life situation. As 'tangled' as Malay idioms may seem to appear, Malaysian Chinese learners perhaps face some difficulty to understand the idioms possibly due to lack of Malay practice in their daily conversation and exposure to the language. Despite Malay being the national and official language of Malaysia as well as the fact that Malaysian Chinese are surrounded by the Malays, who represent the majority race in Malaysia, some of them probably have still not mastered the language, let alone to practice its idioms in their conversation with Malays as the native speakers. One of the factors that might contribute to this phenomenon is self-consciousness in the learners. Therefore, the present study attempts to investigate

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whether the Malaysian Chinese generate self-consciousness in utilizing social strategies in learning Malay idioms.

1.1. Problem Statement

Self-consciousness (or self-doubt) as one of the elements of language anxiety, can hinder language learning (Oxford, 1990). Whether Chinese learners of Malay language experience this in learning Malay idioms, particularly via the employment of social strategies is unclear. Also, it is not a definite conclusion that the Chinese learners do like to interact with the native speakers in learning Malay idioms. Thus, it is important for these uncertainties to be discovered.

1.2. Significance of the Study

According to Cook (2001, p. 63), 'Effective acquisition of vocabulary can never be just the learning of individual words and their meanings in isolation.' Thus, idioms being a portion of vocabulary under the category of, multi-word items (Moon, 1997) may require some strategies such as social strategies to maximize the learning of that type of lexical phrases. Based on this premise, it is imperative for us to discover if the Chinese learners of Malay practice social strategies in learning Malay idioms and whether they undergo any self-consciousness in consulting with the native speakers in order for their educators and peers to facilitate their learning of such language component more effectively.

1.3. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To investigate if there is any significant relationship between Malaysian Chinese students' self-consciousness and their perception towards using social strategies in learning Malay idioms.
- To examine if there is any significant difference between male and female Malaysian Chinese students' self-consciousness and their perception towards using social strategies in learning Malay idioms.

1.4. Research Questions

The research questions are based on the objectives and they are as follows:

- Is there any significant relationship between Malaysian Chinese students' self-consciousness and their perception towards using social strategies in learning Malay idioms?
- Is there any significant difference between male and female Malaysian Chinese students' self-consciousness and their perception towards using social strategies in learning Malay idioms?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Malay Language and the Importance of Malay Idioms

Malay Language embraces a very special status in Malaysia, whereby its position as the national language serves many functions in official events in Malaysia. In the beginning of 1983, Malaysian students started to receive their tertiary education in the institutions of higher learning with Malay language as the medium of communication. Malay language appears in every aspect of Malaysians' lives. Its status today shows its capability to stand at par and be competitive with other international languages such as English, French and others. However, enriching the application of Malay language by preserving its literature and applying the Malay idioms in conversations may enhance its usage. According to Mahathir Mohamad (2003), language is significant in developing a sense of one nation, and thus, the medium of instruction is always associated with the definitive race. He also states that the new immigrants should regard the medium of instruction as the language that should be accepted by all races. Thus, since Malay language is the official language of Malaysia, it can be concluded that the Malay language should be learnt by the Malaysian Chinese, as this entails their identification as Malaysian citizens.

According to McCarthy (2000, p. 8), 'Idioms are only one type of multi-word unit found in the vocabularies of languages. Binomials (and occasionally trinomials) are another. These are pairs and trios of words which display fixed membership and sequence and which like idioms, should be treated as single vocabulary items.' Idiom is defined as, 'a lexical item (usually a phrase or clause) whose meaning cannot be derived from the sum of its parts' (McCarthy, 2000, p. 158). According to Hassan Muhammad Ali (1996, p.

6), 'The idiom is merely an assembly of simple words which when used appropriately creates an entirely different meaning.' Based on this definition, the combination of words that are classified as 'simple' should not be understood simply literally in the case of idioms which this ironically indicates that idioms are complicated to comprehend despite the simple words involved. For example, a Malay idiom, *panjang tangan* which literally means, 'long hand', it non-literally however means 'have the liking for stealing" or "always steal." Some other examples of Malay idioms are, *otak beku* (literally means, 'frozen brain') refers to a person who is dumb or not having an intelligent brain, and *makan angin* (literally means, 'eating wind') denotes having a sightseeing or visiting a place for pleasure. Schmitt (2000, p. 100) mentions, "Using idioms correctly is one of the things that set apart fluent speakers of a language…" Ellis (1997, p. 130) also highlights the importance of idioms as he mentions, "An important index of native-like competence is that the learner uses idioms fluently." He as well elaborates that to speak like a native speaker, one has to speak idiomatically through the employment of frequent and common collocations. Therefore, the mastery of Malay idioms can signify one's high proficiency in the language, thus learning them should be regarded vital.

2.2. Social Strategies in Second Language Learning

Oxford (1990) classifies social strategies into three main categories: i) asking questions (which comprise of asking for clarification/verification, and asking for correction), ii) cooperating with others (which consists of cooperating with peers, and cooperating with proficient users of the new language'), and iii) empathizing with others (which includes developing cultural understanding and becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings). Schmitt (2000) claims that social strategies as a division of vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) have the objective of improving one's language learning via communicating with individuals, be it his own teacher or fellow classmates. This communication can involve providing synonyms, translations etc for clarification. Brown (2000) in explaining the social strategies proposed by O'Malley et al (1985), argues that socio-affective strategies consist of L2 learning techniques involving communication and social mediating activity. The strategies under this classification of L2 learning strategies are divided into two sections: i) cooperation (which involves getting feedback by working with one or more peers, obtaining pool information or a model of language activity, and ii) question for clarification (which includes asking an instructor or a native speaker for repetition, paraphrasing, explanation and/or examples). According to Moon (1997), idioms have holistic meanings which cannot be retrieved from the individual meaning of the component words. This is the same case for Malay idioms as Malay idioms can be difficult to comprehend due to their meanings are retrieved from the string of words as a single unit, which it can be problematic for non-native learners to learn the idioms, thus requiring them to perhaps consult with the Malays as native-speakers to learn Malay idioms.

2.3. Self-consciousness in Second Language Learning and the Possible Perceptions Created

Oxford (2011) believes that language anxiety is a type of apprehension in which learners feel nervous and anxious to demonstrate socially in language learning, particularly in communication. Scovel (2011) proposes a more general definition of anxiety as he claims that anxiety represents an unclear sense of unease. Brown (2000) in defining anxiety relates this concept to among others the feeling of self-doubt (Scovel, 1978). This idea is also shared by Oxford (1990) who claims self-doubt as part of the negative manifestation of anxiety. Rochat (2009, p. 105) relates anxiety to self-consciousness as he states, "The knowledge that derives from the contemplation of the self can be a source of great anxiety, often associated with a 'self-conscious' experience of fear and devaluation." Rochat (2009) also believes that being self-conscious involves experience of being evaluated by others, and shame as the representation of self-consciousness is the fundamental emotion. A study by Coleman (1996) discovered that women in L2 learning felt more embarrassed by their mistakes. Thus, the Chinese as part of Malaysia where its national language is Malay, perhaps feel self-conscious regarding their fellow Malaysian Malays' perception of their not knowing about Malay idioms through their interaction (the practice of social strategies) with the Malays.

2.4. Race and Gender as the Factors Affecting Social Strategies Used

According to Oxford (1990), there are some factors that can influence the choice of language learning strategies and how they are employed which among others are language being learned; degree of awareness; gender; personality characteristics; learning style; and national origin. Malaysian students being of different racial backgrounds possess various ways of interaction in the classroom context (Kaur, 2006).The Chinese are less instinctive compared to the Indian students. The Chinese on the other hand, are generally analytical

learners who perform tasks individually and speak little unless being spoken to (Kaur, 2006). This probably rooted back to the way the Chinese community perceived their literary acquisition in the past, whereby learners had to undergo basic understanding of 3500 different Chinese characters beforehand. As a result, this great effort had encouraged the Chinese to adopt hard work, constant practice and memorization, and also intensive rote learning which these make them regarded vocal empowerment as not important (Kaur, 2006). Besides race, gender is another important contributing factor for the strategies employed by learners in language learning. According to Goddard and Patterson (2000), 'gender' is concerned with socially expected characteristics for males and females. To relate this to language learning strategies, Cook (2001) in his elaboration on individual variation in relation to language learning, proposes sex differences as a determinant for the strategies employed. Green and Oxford (1995) revealed that women utilized more strategies compared to men especially social strategies. Therefore, additional insights to the issue of race and gender being the contributing factors for the learner's selection of language learning strategies are important to be obtained.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A quantitative research involving descriptive and correlational design using a questionnaire survey was conducted to collect data.

3.2. Sampling Method and Participants

A non-probability sampling, specifically a purposive one was employed where 35 Malaysian Chinese Bachelor's students of Limkokwing University of Creative Technology (LUCT) who were taking *Bahasa Kebangsaan A* Course, were randomly selected from Class Section 1. There were 15 male and 20 female respondents who were between 19 to 22 years old involved in this study.

3.3. Instrument

A 27-item questionnaire which included self-reporting statements concerning perceptions towards using social strategies in learning Malay idioms vis-à-vis self-consciousness was utilized. The participants' responses to the items were measured using five-point Likert Scale where a numerical value was assigned to each level of agreement: Strongly disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Undecided = 3, Agree = 4, and Strongly agree = 5.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected by first explaining the nature of the research and some technical terms involved in the questionnaire before the respondents began answering it. Next, a data analysis was performed on Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 17.0. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations etc were computed to summarize the participants' responses to the questionnaire. The data collected was processed in response to the research questions addressed.

4. Findings

The findings in this section are presented in the sequence of research questions posed. The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient value obtained was 0.712 which this indicates that the instrument was reliable to be employed.

- The Relationship between Respondents' Self-consciousness and their Perception towards Using Social Strategies in Learning Malay Idioms

The strength of association between the two variables; the participants' self-consciousness and their perception towards using social strategies was calculated using Pearson correlation coefficient. It was discovered that there was a positive and quite strong relationship between the two variables since the coefficient value acquired was, r= 0.525. The results thus revealed that the two groups of respondents when combined together, in majority reported possessing self-consciousness within them towards using social strategies in learning Malay idioms, and this was true especially for the females. For instance, there were nine male respondents (60%) who agreed with the statement, "As a Malaysian, I should feel embarrassed for not knowing about Malay idioms" (Item 3), while there were 14 female respondents (70%) who agreed to the item. Another example, there were three males (20%) who assigned 'agree' to Item 5 ("If I ask my Malay friends about Malay idioms, they will know about my non-mastery of the language"), while there were 12

females (60%) who agreed and four of them (20%) who strongly agreed to this item. Overall, there were more female respondents who indicated being self-conscious in interacting with the Malays in their attempt to learn Malay idioms.

- The Relationship between Respondents' Self-consciousness and their Perception towards Using Social Strategies in Learning Malay Idioms

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference between male and female respondents. The results indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups of respondents in their response to the items in the questionnaire except for their responses to Item 1, 19, 23, 25 and 26 since their p-value generated was >0.05. Table 1 below presents the significant difference discovered between male and female respondents with regard to their responses to eight selected items in the questionnaire. Based on the table, Item 9 shows a significant difference between males (M= 2.33, SD= 0.617) and females (M= 4.30, SD= 0.470), t= 10.713, df= 33, and p= 0.000 that these signify that there were more females who experienced feeling embarrassed to inquire their Malay friends about Malay idioms. Item 15 also shows a significant difference as the p value discovered was 0.000 where the females outnumbered the males with respect to feeling worried about being made fun of for asking about Malay idioms. In summary, the males mostly were less self-conscious in employing social strategies for Malay idiom learning compared to the females.

Table 1: Independent Samples T-test

Statements	Sex	n	t-test for Equality of Means					
			Mean	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean dif
6. As Malay idioms have been taught since I was in school, I will feel ashamed of myself to still ask my Malay friends about the idioms.	M	15	2.53	0.640	-8.477	33	0.000	-1.667
	F	20	4.20	0.523				
7. I prefer to learn Malay idioms from books rather than asking my Malay friends about them.	M	15	2.47	0.640	-7.884	26.159	0.000	-1.583
	F	20	4.05	0.510				
8. I prefer not to consult with my Malay friends when I do not understand any Malay idioms.	M	15	2.53	0.834	-6.923	22.84	0.000	-1.717
	F	20	4.25	0.550				
9. I always feel embarrassed to ask my Malay friends about Malay idioms.	M	15	2.33	0.617	-10.713	33	0.000	-1.967
	F	20	4.30	0.470				
10. I always feel embarrassed if my Malay friends correct my mistakes while using Malay idioms.	M	15	2.13	0.352	-15.593	32.999	0.000	-2.167
	F	20	4.30	0.470				
11. I always feel nervous to ask my Malay friends about Malay idioms.	M	15	2.13	0.640	-8.392	33	0.000	-1.967
	F	20	4.10	0.718				
12. I think learning Malay idioms with my Malay friends is fun.	M	14	3.64	0.842	4.347	32	0.000	1.143
	F	20	2.50	0.688				
15. I am always worried my Malay friends will make fun of me for asking them about Malay idioms.	M	15	2.60	0.910	-4.756	18.281	0.000	-1.2
	F	20	3.80	0.410				

n= 35

5. Discussions and Conclusions

Obviously, there is a connection between self-consciousness and the employment of social strategies in learning Malay idioms. However, the existence of self-consciousness is more evident in the females compared to males. Despite the discovery of some characteristics associated with males and females such as the quality of males being more independent as compared to females who are claimed to be more co-operative (Morgan, 1986, as cited in Goddard & Patterson, 2000), these elements of both genders seem merely stereotypical when it is concerned with using social strategies as indicated in this research, since the male respondents mostly seem to have no difficulty in cooperating with their Malay friends in learning idioms. Perhaps, the opposite situation for the females is due to their negative expectations of the outcome of their consulting with the Malays regarding Malay idioms. Probably, the female respondents are more

concerned about their Malay friends being judgmental towards them, possibly because idioms are an indicator of their non-mastery of the language. Thus, it can be concluded that learning Malay idioms using social strategies does not suit the female respondents as their self-consciousness will prevent them from using such strategies as compared to males. Clearly, the development of self-consciousness in learning an L2 with the native speakers via interaction is more influenced by gender rather than other factors such as the status of the language or an individual's race. In spite of females in general being regarded as those who always place emphasis on relationships and present it by their communication behavior (…), this research however revealed the opposite as the female respondents mostly reported feeling uncomfortable communicating with the Malays in learning Malay idioms.

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