AN INVESTIGATION INTO ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL)
LEARNER PARTICIPATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES: A
SOCIAL VIEW

Submitted by Noraini Zulkepli to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education in April 2012

This dissertation is available for Library use only on the understanding that it is
copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without
proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified
and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a
degree by this or any other University.

Signature
Abstract

Learner participation in language learning opportunities has been configured differently by different learning theories. In the domain of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the cognitive view of learning has been dominant in explaining learner participation. It has been widely accepted that it should be in the form of participation in oral activities which leads to gains in linguistic competence. The aim of this thesis is to understand the issue of learner participation from the social perspective, where a broader understanding of learning will be employed informed by the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and others. To do so, this study investigates the forms of participation of six ESL learners in suburban Malaysia in two contexts: in-class and out-of-class.

In order to understand the issue of learner participation from a social viewpoint, data were collected using classroom observations, learners’ interviews, learner diaries, and photographs taken by them. All the data were transcribed and analysed qualitatively. In order to handle the large amount of data, the Nvivo software package was used for organisation and retrieval purposes.

The findings reveal several insights about learner participation. First, learners are active agents where they constantly make decisions on what to engage with and how, and act on the norms and expectations that are imposed on them in a particular sociocultural context. Second, the six learners are members of or aspired to become members of several communities: academically successful learners; successful ESL learners; proficient speakers of the target language; the classroom; and youth. Thus, they aligned their forms of participation with these various communities. Third, learners in this study tended to distinguish between learning and other kinds of engagement. They tended to equate certain forms of participation as actions that one needed to take to learn the language; thus other forms of participation accorded less value.
In this study, some insights from Communities of Practice (CoP) theory—learning as a process of gaining membership in a particular community and that learners move from peripheral to core membership—were used to understand the issue of learner participation. However, upon understanding and interpreting the data, it was found that CoP theory is limited in several ways. First, CoP focuses only on one type of community (e.g. the classroom) in one temporal dimension. Yet, findings indicate that there are several other communities that exist in the classroom at one time. Due to this shortcoming, this study has turned to the concept of ‘figured worlds’ (Holland et al, 2001). Secondly, CoP theory argues for a group dynamic. Less recognition is given to the fact that individual learners are also dynamic and agentive. Akkerman and Meijer (2011) suggest dialogical views on identity; in which a framework is provided that acknowledges the multiple, discontinuous and social nature of identity (a postmodern view), while at the same time assumes identity as being unitary, continuous and individual (a modern view). Thirdly, CoP tends to focus on a singular “identity-in-practice (Tan and Barton (2008). Tan and Barton (ibid: 50) argue for the plurality of identities-in-practice (IdPs); rather than a singular “identity-in-practice (IdP) as suggested by Lave and Wenger (1991).

The view of learning as boundary crossing seems to better describe the kinds of participation and learning that have been suggested by the findings generated in the study. Instead of looking at learning as participation in a particular community, learning as boundary crossing better captures the dynamic of learner participation in language learning opportunities, of learners as whole persons (rather than fragmented identities), and of learners as agentive beings.
# Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... 4

TABLE OF CONTENTS .............................................................................................................. 5

LIST OF TABLES ..................................................................................................................... 8

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. 10

LIST OF APPENDICES .......................................................................................................... 11

CHAPTER 1  INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY ........................................................................ 12
  1.1 INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW ....................................................................................... 12
  1.2 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY ...................................................................................... 15
  1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY ............................................................................................. 21
  1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY ................................................................................... 22
  1.5 OUTLINE OF THE STUDY ............................................................................................. 23
  1.6 SUMMARY ..................................................................................................................... 25

CHAPTER 2  BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY ........................................................................ 26
  2.0 INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 26

SECTION 1 ............................................................................................................................. 26
  2.1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION .................................................................................... 26
  2.1.1 Malaysia: Some General Information ...................................................................... 26
  2.1.2 The Status of English in Malaysia .......................................................................... 28
  2.1.3 The Use of English in Malaysia ............................................................................. 29
  2.1.4 The History of English Education in Malaysia ....................................................... 31
    2.1.4.1 Pre-world War (1939-1945) ............................................................................ 32
    2.1.4.2 Post-world War .............................................................................................. 32
  2.1.5 Issues Regarding the Standard of English in Malaysia ........................................ 33

SECTION II ........................................................................................................................... 34
  2.2 GOVERNMENT’S EFFORTS AND POLICIES ON ENGLISH EDUCATION ................. 34

SECTION III ......................................................................................................................... 37
  2.3 THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM, THE SYLLABUS, AND THE EXAMINATION......................................................................................................................... 37
  2.3.1 Classroom Context Factors .................................................................................... 41
  2.4 SUMMARY ..................................................................................................................... 41

CHAPTER 3  LITERATURE REVIEW ..................................................................................... 43
  3.0 INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 43

SECTION 1 ........................................................................................................................... 45
  3.1 THEORIES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND CONCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATION ....... 45
  3.1.1 Behaviourism ........................................................................................................... 46
  3.1.2 Cognitivism ............................................................................................................. 46
    3.1.2.1 The IIO Model ............................................................................................... 48
  3.1.3 Social View of Learning ......................................................................................... 51
    3.1.3.1 ZPD and its interpretations .......................................................................... 55
3.4.1 The Four Principles ........................................... 80
3.4.2 Critique of the Methodology .................................. 83
3.5 SUMMARY ............................................................... 84

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .................................. 85
4.0 INTRODUCTION ............................................................ 85

SECTION I ........................................................................ 86
4.1 THE PHILOSOPHICAL STANCE ........................................ 86
4.1.1 Interpretivism and Its Role in Methodological Decision Making in this Study ................. 89
4.1.1.1 Case Study .................................................... 94
4.1.1.2 Reflexivity .................................................... 96

SECTION II .................................................................... 97
4.2 THE RESEARCH PROCEDURE ........................................ 98
4.2.1 Research Site ......................................................... 100
4.2.2 Research Participants ............................................. 100
4.2.3 Data Collection Strategies ....................................... 102
4.2.4 Data Analysis .......................................................... 113
4.2.4.1 Analysing Interview Data .................................. 114
4.2.4.2 Analysing Classroom Observation Data .................. 121
4.2.4.3 Analysing Photographs .................................... 126
4.2.4.4 Analysing Diary Entries .................................... 129

SECTION III ................................................................... 130
4.3 ETHICAL ISSUES .......................................................... 130
4.4 TRUSTWORTHINESS .................................................... 133
4.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY ...................................... 136
4.6 SUMMARY ................................................................. 137

CHAPTER 5 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS: OUT-OF-CLASS PARTICIPATION .................................. 138
5.0 INTRODUCTION ............................................................ 138
5.1 Presentation of Analysis ........................................................................................................ 138
  5.1.1 Resources ................................................................................................................... 138
  5.1.2 Forms of Participation ............................................................................................... 146
  5.1.3 Gains from Engagement ........................................................................................... 152
  5.1.4 Perceptions about Learning English ......................................................................... 155
  5.1.5 Family Support .......................................................................................................... 159
5.2 Summary ........................................................................................................................... 160

CHAPTER 6 Analysis of Findings: In-Class Participation ............................................................... 161
  6.0 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 161
  6.1 Presentation of Analysis ............................................................................................... 161
    6.1.1 Resources ............................................................................................................... 161
    6.1.2 Forms of Participation ........................................................................................... 166
    6.1.3 Gains from Engagement ....................................................................................... 174
    6.1.4 English Learning Experiences .............................................................................. 177
    6.1.5 Views about Learning English .............................................................................. 180
    6.1.6 Use ......................................................................................................................... 181
  6.2 Summary ........................................................................................................................ 181

CHAPTER 7 Discussion of Findings ............................................................................................ 183
  7.0 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 183
  7.1 Discussion of Findings ................................................................................................. 183
    7.1.1 Discussion of Research Question 1 ....................................................................... 184
    7.1.2 Discussion of Research Question 2 ....................................................................... 190
    7.1.2.1 Learners as Autonomous Individuals ................................................................. 202
  7.2 Summary ........................................................................................................................ 203

CHAPTER 8 Discussion of Emergent Themes, Revisiting Some Principles of Understanding ESL Learner Participation in Language Learning Opportunities and Revisiting the Relationship Between In and Out-of-Class Learning .................................................................................................................. 205
  8.0 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 205
  8.1 Emergent Themes ......................................................................................................... 205
    8.1.1 Learners as Active Agents ...................................................................................... 206
    8.1.2 ESL Learners and their Membership of their Various Communities .................... 210
    8.1.3 A Separation between Engagement to Learn and Other Forms of Engagement .... 217
    8.1.4 Learners’ Views of Selves as Second Language Learners ...................................... 218
    8.1.5 The Value of English ............................................................................................. 220
  8.2 Revisiting Some Principles of Understanding ESL Learner Participation in Language Learning Opportunities .................................................................................................. 221
    8.2.1 Revisiting the Four Principles ................................................................................. 221
    8.2.2 Revisiting ‘Resources’ and ‘Circumstances’ ............................................................ 227
      8.2.2.1 Revisiting ‘Resources’ ..................................................................................... 227
      8.2.2.2 Revisiting ‘Circumstances’ ............................................................................. 231
  8.3 Revisiting My Understanding of the Relationship Between In and Out-of-Class Learning ... 234
  8.4 Summary ........................................................................................................................ 237

CHAPTER 9 Contributions and Recommendations .................................................................... 239
  9.0 Introduction .................................................................................................................... 239
  9.1 Contributions of the Study ........................................................................................... 240
    9.1.1 Theoretical Contributions ...................................................................................... 241
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.1.2</td>
<td>Pedagogical Contributions</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>Methodological Issues and Future Research</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>The Impact of the Research on the Participants</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>Personal Reflection</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>