

# An Exploratory Investigation of Asian Students' Sense of Dignity in a Non-native English Language Learning Context:

## A Case Study

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### Abstract

This paper explores how learning English affects Asian students' sense of dignity in an Australian social environment, and how they deal with negative encounters at school, at work and at public places. The research methodology used was in-depth interviews with seven postgraduate international students from six different countries in Asia and a convenient snowball sampling. Regardless of the non-native students' English proficiency test results, they all encountered language and cultural obstacles during their transition to the Australian social environment. Their prior motivation and attitudes vis-à-vis English language learning in their homeland positively impacted on their responses to those obstacles. Such obstacles affected their well-being and sense of dignity negatively because mastering English is seen as an accomplishment.

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### 1. Introduction

In the current era, English is increasingly recognised as it dominates the world as a global language (EGL) of books, air traffic control, international business, academic conferences, science, technology, diplomacy, education, to name a few (Graddol, 1996; Tsuda, 2008). In the world of non-native English speaking background (N-NESB), English language learning and acquiring are consequently seen as a fundamental tool to reach a professional achievement (Guilherme 2007). At the same time, it brings about the increasing number of intercultural communication and interactions in global context (Hatos 2006; Xiao & Petraki 2007). It is undoubted that English becomes the most powerful international lingua franca or a global language (Crystal 2003) and the language of globalisation and the greatest economic and political power (Tsuda 2008).

Globalisation has been contemporarily part of humans' lives, and the recognition of using, learning and acquiring English as a vehicle of a sense of accomplishment in the world of N-NESB (Crystal, 2003) is extensively valued. This value can partially be witnessed from a multitude of international students enrolling in Australian higher education institutions for the last decade. English may then become a key indicator in evaluating N-NESB learners' sense of dignity because they study and use English as a foreign language (EFL) but their English competence will in part determine their academic and social success in their homeland. The sense of dignity in this paper is adopted in line with the qualitative aspect as a concern of N-NESB people's well-being in a sense of dignity. The concern is on how they feel when they communicate in English outside and inside the class based on perceptions of how well they learn and utilise English. This positively and/or negatively affects their life in a new social environment. Once they perceive personal security, they feel personal harmony.

Concomitant with the worldwide spread of using and learning English, Crystal (2003) further states that they may have varied feelings about their motivation to learn the language, may question whether it is intrinsic or extrinsic. Irrespective of which of these two types of motivation learners may hold, in time they will make progress in learning English, develop pride in their success and appreciate the power of

communication they control. Then again, if they are required to move in a world of achievement wherein high English proficiency counts, they "may feel envious, resentful, or angry...feelings which give rise to fears, whether real or imaginary, and fears lead to conflict" (ibid:3). Lack of self-confidence may come to dominate the learners' thoughts.

The motivation behind this study is twofold. Firstly, the researcher is one of the N-NESB students. Secondly, there have been no previous studies on human dignity in an intercultural and foreign language learning context. It is hence worthwhile to investigate how N-NESB students' well-being is affected in Australian social context. Their lives may or may not be affected in a sense that they may or may not feel secure and/or dignified in themselves vis-à-vis the ways in which they are perceived. The aims of this paper therefore are to examine the following:

1. how learning English affects the perception of students' sense of dignity in their daily lives at school, at work and in public places.
2. how students cope with their negative experiences affected by their English language learning.

## 2. Pertinent Literature Reviews

Literature reviews relevant to the present study are connected with the adaptation theory in the world of N-NESB and the qualitative aspect of human security significantly influenced by English language learning. The adaptation refers to the U-curve of cultural adaptation (Oberg, 1960) along with the use and study of EFL and as an international language (EIL). EFL is referred to countries, such as China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Thailand and Vietnam where English is not commonly spoken in daily life and it becomes foreign to the locals (Chi 2006; Tsuda 2008) which "further serves global and local needs as a language of wider communication (Brutt-Griffler, 2002:24). EIL, also known as a lingua franca, is a link language, a medium of communication between peoples speaking different languages, particularly utilised for communicative purposes more commonly than ever before (McKay, 2002).

In the current study, the subjects use and learn English as EFL in their home country. This is the first stage. Then, in the second stage, English becomes EIL for them, when they become postgraduate international students in Australia. Although they are non-native English speakers, they utilise English as a medium of communication inside the classroom, where they need to succeed academically, and outside the classroom where they need to survive socially. English in this context is considered beneficial since the acceptance of its use takes place on a cooperative and equal footing with others (Pennycook, 1994), optimistically leading to peace and understanding across cultures. In the EIL context, the subjects confront what Kachru (1995) terms as 'World Englishes', varieties of English spoken by people in the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle. The first refers to the world of English historically spoken as a mother tongue or a first language, primarily refers to the following countries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. The second refers to a large number of territories, namely Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Sri Lanka and Singapore. The third refers to countries whose populations utilise English for specific purposes along with other native and non-native English speakers.

Fairclough (1989) contends that some people are persuaded to learn English, not only through coercion but also through significant ideals and with respect to power. As is the case of acquiring English competence in a developing country, the acquisition of English will provide learners with more choices, better opportunities for employment and socially prestigious positions. English, in this sense, demonstratively plays what Pennycook (1994) calls the role of "a gatekeeper" (p.14). Acknowledging these options, probabilities and positions that learners obtain may direct them to a sense of feeling proud of their success and appreciating the power of communication they control (Crystal, 2003).

The adaptation process was initially theorised by anthropologist Kalervo Oberg (1960), who initiated a four-stage model of cultural adjustment, each stage associated with the progression of newcomers' experiences in a new social environment. First, it is the honeymoon stage, considered positive because newcomers encounter initial excitement. Everything around them appears to be new and fun to learn. However, those involved need to be aware that participating in a cultural transition may expose them to disorienting or unfamiliar encounters. Oberg (1960) termed these experiences the 'culture shock' or

'crisis stages' which follow the 'honeymoon stage'. Second, newcomers in society may become frustrated and often hostile toward host nationals because they experience difficulty coping with everyday functions. They emotionally feel 'down' and may start to miss their homeland. Third, there is the adjustment phase in which newcomers start to develop new ways to deal with the difficulties they face. If they are successful in learning the host language and navigating their way in society, then they come to the starting point, stepping into the new cultural environment. Finally, it is the stage when newcomers have already accepted and come to appreciate the host culture and feel comfortable with 'another' way of living. When they return home, they unconsciously bring with them the new social mores they have acquired, become accustomed to and experience 'something missing' in their lives. This phenomenon could be termed 'reverse culture shock'. This paper however does not place great emphasis on the stages of honeymoon and reverse culture shock because these issues are outside this paper's parameters of enquiry.

Taking the original adaptation theory into account, Sussman (2000:358) contends that whatever the outcomes of cultural transitions, sojourners in a new cultural environment are most likely to encounter what are collectively labelled 'culture shock, adjustment and cross-cultural adaptation (acculturation)'. Culture shock occurs when a newcomer to a given society is exposed to a 'different' often alien cultural environment, new symbols, roles, relationships, social cognitions and behaviour patterns. Adjustment, on the other hand, is a motivational process that takes place when the newcomer tries to adjust his or her cognition and behaviour in order to increase effectiveness in interaction and experience and to diminish any unpleasantness. Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the positive consequence of the process of adjustment. The newcomer's cognition, behaviour and interpretations of behaviour are adjusted and able to fit to the new cultural environment, resulting in effective interaction. Sussman (2000) concludes that among these outcomes, cultural adaptation/ adjustment is the most crucial for the newcomer.

What profoundly affect sojourners' learning in the classroom is their styles of cognition, communication, relation and motivation (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2007). Asian students appear to encounter obstacles in the Western educational context due to their cultural differences. Most Asian cultures are based on collectivism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance as opposed to most Western cultures (Hofstede, 1980, 1984). Consequently, in many Asian cultures, such as Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Thailand and Vietnam, students are expected to be passive in the class where it is well structured. Collaboration in the class is more encouraged while a focus on critical thinking is less. Kochman (1985) describes this as a passive-receptive posture in that teachers have an authority over their students who are taught to only listen attentively, take notes and use minimum body movement. Teacher-student interactions may occur if students appropriately get their teachers attention, namely raising their hand properly at the right time and waiting to be picked for the turn. For this very reason, classroom activities are more relevant to memorization than to critical thinking.

Apart from the conceptual adaptation (Oberg 1960 and Sussman 2000), Schuman (1976) hypothesises that psychological distance is one of the significant factors in the process of learning a second language in a new cultural context. Usually, it is connected with experiencing language shock and culture shock. When learners experience language shock, they have difficulty understanding unfamiliar words and expressions. Holliday, Hyde and Kullman (2004) suggest that by extension, learners become confused, embarrassed or 'lost'. How well they can improve their language depends upon how well they can cope with their feelings. When they find it hard to use their cultural problem-solving and copying mechanisms, they may enter a mental state of disorientation, stress, fear and anxiety. This tends to inhibit their attention and energy required to learn a second language. Adapting to life in a new cultural context may not prove to be simple.

Dörnyei's (2001) undertaking a work with Clément, conclusively suggests a synthesis of the constituents of various constructs in motivation in second language learning into seven dimensions. Five of those fit in the current study: 1) affective/integrative, 2) instrumental/pragmatic, 3) self-concept-related, 4) goal-related, and 5) significant others-related. The first dimension which refers to a general affective 'core' of the second language motivation complex related to attitudes, beliefs and values which are associated with the process, the target and the outcome of learning, includes variables such as 'interactiveness' 'affective motive' 'language attitudes' 'intrinsic motivation' 'attitudes towards second language learning' 'enjoyment' and 'interest'. The second refers to extrinsic, largely utilitarian factors such as financial benefit. The third refers to learner-specific variables such as self-confidence, self-esteem, anxiety and

need for achievement. The fourth is involved with various goal characteristics, while the final dimension refers to the influence of parents, family and friends. Each motivational circumstance is crucial to learning English successfully.

The lives of N-NESB students in the Australian social context are affected in a sense that they feel secure and dignified in themselves primarily because of their experiences in culture shock and language shock, more so in the classroom. Disorientation in cultural norms in the Western classroom, particularly individualism, uncertainty avoidance and power distance, negatively affects their class participation. Their inadequate English knowledge in the varieties of spoken English which produces unfamiliar accented speech give them a difficult time to understand class discussions and lectures. The cultural and language barriers they encounter render them to seek assistance from different sources in order to adjust themselves to the new environment. The sources they seek for assistance are influenced by their cultural collectivism. Their past attitudes and motivation vis-à-vis English language learning as well as reasons why they study in Australia are factors positively influencing their adjustment.

### **3. Research Methodology**

Data for the study were collected through in-depth interviews ( $N = 7$ ), conducted using open-ended questions as well as demographic surveys (see Appendix A). The qualitative approach was selected for data collection because of the study is not concerned with measurement. It draws upon reality through interaction and response by means of the conversations held with each interviewee. Each of them is encouraged to narrate any personal life experiences that are relevant to the key research questions (Walker 1985). The research participants are postgraduate international students enrolling in the same program at a recognised university in Sydney. Although all of them are female from Indonesia, Korea, People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam and there is an assumption that females have better potential to successfully learn a language than males (Oxford 1995; Tercanlioglu 2004), this paper does not focus on the role of gender in English language learning. Their ages range from 23 to 34; one of the participants does not want to specify her age. The participants and the University they attend are all assigned pseudonyms in order to ensure their anonymity. Mandy, Sherry and Vivian, are from Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, respectively. Helen and Jenny are from People's Republic of China, while Amy is from Taiwan and Lucy from South Korea. Mandy has been in Australia for four years, Sherry for three and a half years, Lucy for two years, Vivian for nine months, Amy for six months, Jenny for three months and Helen for forty days. They all study at National Park University.

Based on my initial contact through a few friends, a convenient snowball sampling was employed to recruit the participants (Jensen 2002). Communicative validity, a conceptual framework devised by Kvale (cited in Hess-Biber & Leavy 2006), was used as a tool to validate the findings because of the perspective of the in-depth interviews, assumed to be subjective, rather than objective. The validation procedures occurred one week after all participants were interviewed. They were asked to read through the transcribed and interpreted data and correct any errors. All but one participant was contacted face-to-face. One responded electronically. The data were then analysed using a holistic strategy, involving interpretation of the participants' implicit narratives in context. The data were then constructed into critical themes (by looking for recurring ideas and/or patterns), describing the connections between the interviewees' experiences (Rossman & Rallies 2003).

The time spent on the interviews was approximately between 1 and 1.5 hours, and they were conducted over a period of seven weeks. During each interview, although English obviously is not native to all participants, it was used as a medium of communication and interpretation. Informality was at the same time carefully created by means of chatting over a cup of coffee, a meal at the University cafeteria and a note-taking instead of tape recording. All of them were also informed of my motivation in conducting the interviews, through my revealing that I was in the same situation as them and would like to carry this project out as a case study. These factors created clear advantages in showing a shared empathy between each participant and the researcher.

### **4. Findings**

The data reveal the participants' attitudes towards and motivation vis-à-vis learning English, the purpose of their study in Australia, negative encounters contributable to their inadequate English competence, and their strategies for dealing with their negative experiences. Five critical themes were extracted: 1)

attitudes towards and motivation in learning English, 2) reasons for study abroad, 3) discrepancy between perceived and practical language competence, 4) academic and functional language competence, and 5) patterns of socialisation determined by language competence. The interview questions for the first two themes were not initially included. The results emerged after discussing the lengthy periods that the participants have studied English and the importance of study abroad in an English-speaking country. However, they were included because they were cultural factors that positively influenced the participants to adjust their academic and social lives in Australia.

### **Theme one: Attitudes and motivation in learning English**

All of the participants are from Southeast Asia and the Pacific Rim where at school they were legally required to study English, which is considered a foreign language. They all started learning English at an early stage, ranging from primary school to junior high school. Each of them described their experiences in and feelings towards learning English. Most of them, with the exception of Sherry and Vivian, evinced positive attitudes towards and motivation in learning the language. For many of the participants, their passion for learning English and to be successful in the acquisition of the language motivated their respective journeys. Some participants' journeys were long while others were short. Some shared similar routes while others did not. In some participants' cases, it appeared that the enjoyment they experienced when learning emerged naturally, almost as if it were instinctive. For example, Helen expressed her joy in studying English. She had found herself "talented" and adept at "memorising vocabulary" at the very start of learning the language in junior high school. Even when she pursued her education at University (where she majored in English), and had lost some of her facility for rote learning, she still possessed that same talent. When reading a text, if she did not know the meaning of each word, she claimed that she could still interpret, grasp the main idea of the text and predict what the author wanted to tell her. This ability built up her sense of self-confidence in learning the language. Another case was Mandy, who also insisted that she always enjoyed learning English, although it was not easy for her when it came to grammatical rules and speaking.

Among the participants, Jenny and Amy were good examples of being motivated in and having positive attitudes towards English language learning. The former revealed that her father was influential in her interest in learning English. Back in 1980, her father, a physicist, had a mission to complete a project in Germany over a period of two years. After he came home, he shared his experiences overseas with Jenny and told her that if she knew and understood English, she would learn more about the world. The latter disclosed how her mother motivated her to study English more for professional purposes, specifically for teaching English. Her mother could not bear to anticipate her daughter changing jobs five times within one year. She preferred to see her daughter living a secure life and thought that teaching English would keep her daughter happy and secure while working in the same job. To this end, Amy was encouraged to take the TESOL exam for primary school teaching. However, before she could do so, she had to study for the English test, because she did not have a degree in teaching English.

Besides being encouraged by their parents, participants were motivated in learning English simply through observation. During Jenny's childhood, she recalled seeing her mother attentively listening to a 'babbling' language all the time and kept wondering why she was so interested in that alien tongue. Along with her father's encouragement to study English, she admitted that her familiarity with the language gradually increased and that she no longer felt any animosity towards it. On the contrary, she had fun when she studied it at school. She further mentioned that her interest in English subjects increased. She always got top marks, which made it easy for her to study the language.

Evidently, parents are not the only ones who influence their children to learn English. Amy, for example, stated that in the past English was not compulsory for primary school students. Thus, she was sent to a 'cram' school, where students were provided with any lessons accelerated beyond their levels, to study the language, even though her parents had to spend a lot of extra money on the English programs. Fortunately for her, the English teachers there did a very good job in teaching and building rapport with the students. As a consequence, she developed positive attitudes towards learning English, and because her first English teachers left her with very good impressions, she continued to study English. When she grew more mature and became a high school student, she came to realise that her interest and joy in learning English had additional benefit for her, and became a tool to broaden her worldview.

Helen was the only participant who was exposed to positive reinforcement not only by her English professors but also by her friends and relatives. She talked about some incidents which positively affected her English learning. Her professors built up her confidence and self-esteem by always expressing verbal approval of her writing, requesting her to read her work aloud in front of the class. It was an honour for her to be recognised by her professors. When Helen was asked for some tips vis-à-vis English study skills by her friends and relatives, she felt honoured.

The participants undertook their journeys, taking differing routes, and gaining experience along the way. Many of them found that English had become a useful language in their home country. Furthermore, there was a social promise and recognition to behold, a fact that echoed in their minds when they returned home. They realised that they would get better job opportunities, that their social status would be different if they became educated and could speak English well. People in society would look up to them. Mandy had already experienced this privilege after her boss and colleagues learned that she had an undergraduate degree from Australia. She said that she was treated differently, with appreciation. Her boss asked her advice regarding marketing strategies in Australia. Her co-workers sought her help with English translations.

Helen, Mandy, Sherry and Amy come from societies where the ability to speak English is seen as prestigious. Helen continued to study English as a major at University in her homeland whereas Mandy and Sherry undertook to study for a Bachelors degree and marketing management diploma in Australia. Amy kept up with her English by studying on her own. I would stress here that Amy did not consider having proficiency in English could maximise one's intellect. She knew some important people in her society who could not speak English well, but were knowledgeable, had a broader vision and succeeded in life. However, in general English has proved an invaluable language not only in the participants' home societies but also in cases where people moved to another country in search of a better career and quality of life. This was the motivation that drove Mandy to continue her English study. She said that she planned to get a job in a country where the economy, income and quality of life appealed to her. More importantly, one is not too far away from her home country where some of her good friends live.

When some participants started their journeys to learn English in junior high school, they had negative attitudes towards English language learning. Lucy and Mandy admitted to these feelings. The former revealed that she thought that English was a boring subject and that all she did in class was to read something else. Mandy thought that English was an 'annoying' subject. Along with her friends she hated the subject, and believed that she was the worst student in her high school class. She strongly believes that anything that is forced on people will not motivate them. Hence, in her opinion English should not be a compulsory subject but an optional one.

As the journey continued, one participant realised the importance of English to get through university successfully. Another participant who became interested in the study of English later at university level, felt connected with the language, changed her attitude towards learning English gradually and positively. The first mentioned was Lucy. When she discovered her goal of pursuing higher education, she became more alert and started studying English harder for one year, simply to pass the university entrance exam which required English marks. She suddenly became enthusiastic about learning English and found that her reading skills improved after a year of study. Her listening skills appeared to be better than her speaking skills, as she noticed that there was no emphasis on teaching spoken English at her school. The second participant was Vivian, who admitted that she did not have any other choice but to pursue an English linguistics major, since she was neither good at nor fond of mathematics, science and the social science subjects. Moreover, the outcome of her university entrance exam only allowed her to study English, and she had to accept this. Under these circumstances, she began to feel comfortable learning English.

Life experiences especially negative ones in the workplace, was another driving force for some participants to learn English. Many companies in Asian countries require their employees to be fluent in English, particularly in the area of speaking and writing skills. If applicants acquire these skills, they are offered better pay and position. For example, Sherry's and Lucy's English were not considered good before they arrived in Australia despite their having studied it for a number of years. They had not thought that English was important and took it for granted. After Sherry and Lucy graduated from University with a B.A. degree in Communication Arts and Journalism, respectively, they came to realise

that English was very important for them. Then they both started working for a period of time. Their experiences at work in their home country confirmed that learning and acquiring English was essential. Only Lucy described her experience in detail. As a journalist, she had been unable to communicate with the international athletes who came to her hometown for a world sports competition. She was dissatisfied with her English competence and felt frustrated. Both Sherry and Lucy became motivated to learn English around that time. Sherry came to Australia to study, while Lucy joined an English conversation class in her homeland and studied the language for two years.

Since English has become a part of many participants' culture in terms of ways of working lives, a real need for English competence emerges to enable them to compete in the job market. Companies set certain policies for staff recruitment. Way back in Lucy's home country, for example, many companies require an English proficiency test result, such as IELTS, TOEFL and TOEIC. TOEIC seemed to be the most popular because it was the easiest test. For this reason, it became the 'norm' for new generations to study overseas in an English-speaking country.

Studying abroad in English-speaking countries or in the so-called "the First World" on one hand is seen as "elitist" in some cultures. On the other hand, learning and acquiring English does not make one superior to others; the appreciation given is to the one who has achieved study overseas. In Lucy's culture, while people would appreciate her ability to utilise English, they would not 'look up' to her or treat her in a special way. It was in the same way as Vivian, who perceived that being competent in English did not mean anything in her country; it was for her own benefit and not about society. If people happened to look up to her, it would be because of her perceived "educational elite" status, i.e. that she had studied in Australia, not the English language skills she had acquired. In general, the view in her country is that Western education is 'higher and better'.

### **Theme two: Reasons for study abroad**

Among non-native English speakers, English is considered a lingua franca, a medium of communication between peoples speaking different languages. Mandy and Jenny, for instance, both could see the necessity to study and acquire English language skills, so that they could communicate with foreign friends and business people. This was the main reason why Mandy pursued her undergraduate study in Melbourne, Australia, and why Jenny majored in English literature in her home country.

Parental decision-making primarily influenced Mandy to return to Australia to undertake postgraduate study. Her parents thought that this would be good for her and went ahead making the plans that would determine her future. Mandy revealed that people thought that the education offered in her country was not as good as that offered in the West. She was fortunate to have been supported financially by her parents and to have been educated in Australia.

Sherry who comes from a nuclear family is an example of collectivistic influence. Along with her parents and siblings, she took into account the geographic area and the fact that her parents would provide financial support. She explained that Australia was geographically relatively near her home country compared to other English-speaking countries, so her parents could easily visit her. However, along with her parents, Sherry was concerned about the Australian accent, due to stereotyping by people in her homeland vis-à-vis the Australian accent. Everyone in her family, her father in particular, thought that communicating and interacting with Australians would not be easy because of certain Australian speech patterns. He was worried for fear that Sherry would 'pick up' the accent and talk like an 'Aussie', believing that it could greatly impact her future when she returned home to look for a job. Finally, the family including Sherry all agreed that it was still English, albeit Australian English.

The only participant who refused to take an advice from her family was Lucy. Initially, she chose to study in the United States, yet she could not follow her dreams because of her mother's deal. She said that had she studied there, she would have had to live with her aunt which meant less freedom. Under her aunt's roof, Lucy could not ignore the restrictive rules as she insisted that she preferred to be independent and had done whatever she liked since she graduated from University. She did not want to be controlled like a little girl.

Amy was the only participant whose decision was based mainly on her relationship with an Australian boyfriend, whom she had known and been going out with for three years. Although she had really wanted

to study in Britain, she thought it would be more practical and worthwhile to undertake her study in Australia. She admitted that her relationship with her boyfriend had greatly impacted her decision to study at National Park University in Sydney, because he helped her conduct a comparative survey of it and another University in order to establish which would be the best for her. Although National Park University's tuition fees were more expensive, it was more suited for her needs. She would improve her knowledge of new media and communication and be able to apply it to her English teaching career on her return home. Again, National Park University was located near her boyfriend's house while the other University was situated in a remote area, far from the city. It would have been inconvenient for her to commute.

Other than parents, the whole family and a boyfriend, peers appear to be another influential source of decision-making. Vivian and Lucy were influenced by friends who shared with them their life experiences in English-speaking countries including America, Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand. They considered their friends' experiences invaluable, something Vivian said that she could not find anywhere else or on the Internet. She had some ideas about what life was like in Australia; for instance, the weather was similar to that in her hometown; it would be difficult to get a job and find a house to live in. Lucy admitted that the advice she took from her friends was more likely to be personal than academic. Being a city girl, she enjoyed a city lifestyle. She was not seeking peace and quiet and birds. She preferred to be in the city drinking beer everyday in pubs that stay open 24 hours a day. New Zealand, she believed, would be too quiet for her.

Jenny was the only participant to come to Australia for study who had not made the decision herself. Her employer in her homeland sent her to study in Australia. She said that it could have been any English-speaking country. Study in Australia was fine for her because she respected her boss's recommendation.

The issue of finance was another factor that influenced the participants' decision to study in Australia. After Lucy, Vivian, Amy and Sherry compared English studies across countries including Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, they came to the conclusion that Australia best suited their academic futures. Besides taking advice from friends, Vivian and Lucy, whose priority was to study in the United States learned that living expenses and tuition fees were lower in Australia than in other English-speaking countries. Amy and Sherry, respectively, both mentioned that the currency exchange rates between their own currency and the Australia dollar were the lowest.

A recognised program offered by the University was another reason for sojourners to come to study in Australia. Helen dreamed of becoming a translator and interpreter. Having recently graduated with an English major degree in her home country, she realised that holding a single degree without any experience overseas, especially in an English-speaking country, was not sufficient for her to fulfil her dream. For this reason, she decided to study in Australia after completing her undergraduate degree. She admitted that the reputation of the Translation and Interpreting Program offered by the University influenced her decision to study in Australia. While searching for the information on the website, she noted that the program was ranked highly but finally opted for another postgraduate program, so that she could improve her English skills and not waste her time. Vivian also was not admitted to her first choice, which was the International Business Program.

Helen observed that she could not study translation and interpretation because her IELTS overall band was only 6.5. The program requires an overall band of at least 7.0. She had already missed the 10-week direct entry program, which started five weeks before she arrived in Australia. The only program that was available to her involved communication. She did not mind accepting the offer as she said it was not too difficult for her and that she had some background in communication. Like Helen, Vivian could not study International Business due to her lack of business background knowledge. She was offered two programs: the program that appealed to her most was the same program that Helen had opted to join. After joining the program, she found it useful and suitable for her. She did not regret accepting the offer.

Expectations vis-à-vis lecturing, classroom management and university facilities inevitably affect a participant's decision to study in Australia. Vivian in particular had these expectations as she has learned about cultural difference in educational systems and practices between the East and the West. She said that she looked forward to experiencing these differences. At the end, Vivian concluded that there was one aspect that she had not anticipated. Her expectations of Australia fell short of what she had imagined

to be like "a heaven" for her. In the final analysis, it was just a country in which she anticipated "fabulous education".

### **Theme Three: Discrepancy between perceived and practical language competence**

Regardless of the participants' experience, when it came to interaction inside and outside the classroom where English was adopted as a medium of communication, it was not simple for any of them. Some admitted that they did not expect to confront a language barrier, either inside or outside the classroom. This was because of their work experiences and their confidence in their use of English. Jenny and Amy did not expect their English competence to cause any difficulty in interaction with others, particularly as the former had communicated in English at work over a long period of time. Amy, who was an English teacher at a public primary school in her home country, by virtue of training and experience rather than qualification, did not have a degree in English language teaching. She had a degree in journalism. Amy had visited Australia three times and had an Australian boyfriend, who she had known for three years. More importantly, she did not see the University and city as strange because she had attended teacher training at the University for a few weeks in the past. Helen, in contrast, did expect to experience problems when interacting in class, as she had earlier learned about cultural differences in learning styles.

Vivian was the only participant to realise her expectations. She had experienced lecture differences in Intercultural Communication, a course she had taken during her second semester. She said that the nature of the class and the teaching approach were interesting and appealed to her, albeit they were totally different from what she was familiar with in her home country. The professor, who initiated small group discussions, suggested short video clips to watch and weekly brief readings on power points, encouraged the students to participate in class, and required individual assignments as well as a quiz.

The main problem for the participants was the language barrier. For example, it was difficult for them to understand class discussions because it was usually dominated by their fellow international and native-speaking classmates talking in 'strange' tongues constructed from accents unfamiliar to them. Lucy and Jenny were two examples. They could not join in the discussions and interaction in the lecture room; they thought this was due to their classmates and not to their lecturers. Lucy in particular felt depressed by the variety of accented speech patterns spoken by the non-native English speakers, both European and Asian, whom she had difficulty understanding. She was not used to different foreign accents. She assumed that perhaps it was because she had studied American English that sounded 'smoother' to her because final consonants were linked together and the 'r' and 'l' were not silent.

Jenny's was specifically perplexed by some of the spontaneous talk between the native speakers. She became speechless, uneasy, unconfident and uncomfortable at the outset. She thought that people spoke quickly in Australia and that they used 'lazy' tongues. Her only resource was to react with exclamations like 'Wow!' and 'Oh!' during the classroom discussions. It often took her a long while to respond, as she needed first to determine what the discussion was about. And because of her initial unease, which affected her understanding of English, she started to question herself if she really mastered English as she had previously thought.

Besides the struggle with accented English, there was another barrier in spoken language outside the classroom. Amy discovered that when she had to engage in a group discussion with her classmates from different cultures, some of the words they used did not make sense to her. She had difficulty understanding them and sometimes chose either to ignore the content or let it go. But later she found that forgetting about it and pretending to understand everything was unproductive.

The language barriers derived not only from the participants' classmates but also from their professors. English spoken by some professors was viewed a product of the native environment added to some participants' difficulty in comprehension. Vivian was the only participant who disclosed her frustration about a European lecturer's speech patterns during her first semester. In one specific class, she found the lecture was totally incomprehensible as she could not make any sense out of what the lecturer was saying. She observed that the lecturer spoke heavily accented English with unclear pronunciation. This made her feel even more insecure and unsure regarding her English competence. She thought that the problem possibly lay in the fact that her English was not good enough. The second semester Vivian experienced similar problems although they were not especially big problems for her. She described that she was not really used to hearing English spoken with an Asian accent. It was difficult for her to

understand her Asian lecturer during the first two weeks. After that, she was able to 'tune her ear' and comprehend approximately 99 per cent of what the lecturer was saying.

Not surprisingly, the language barrier also occurred among the participants themselves. Some needed to improve their speaking and reading skills while others needed to improve their writing skills. Mandy lacked the first two skills and Sherry the last. The former sometimes struggled and felt frustrated with reading comprehension for international business subjects, for it took her a lot of time to grasp the main ideas. In addition, she always found speaking much harder than writing; she could express herself more easily in writing than in speaking. Sherry had no problems with her speaking skills but had no little understanding of how to approach working on an assignment. She even resorted to searching for information on the Google website. This was the real start of problems for her. It was difficult for her to narrow down the main ideas, and to think and write critically. Study became a serious issue for her. She admitted that academics in Australia required a high standard of English and that initially she thought her standard of English was fine. The English program in Sydney only taught her general English, which was not exactly difficult. All she needed was to practice speaking; she did not have to attend school every day and only studied for a few hours at a time.

Amy and Vivian became anxious when they were unable to relate to the lecture, especially when the lecturer's examples were based on the local culture. Amy had no idea what the *Big Brother*, a television reality show, was about when one of her lecturers referred to it because there was no such reality television program in her country. Once again she became frustrated. Vivian knew nothing about media, so when the lecturer discussed this topic, her mind went blank. She expressed her boredom and disinterest in the subject.

Interactions outside the class, for example, at a bank caused problems for some participants whose mathematics and calculation skills were poor even in their own language. Both Jenny and Helen attributed the problem at a bank to language incompetence. Interaction was particularly unpleasant as it took much longer than they had expected to overcome the language barrier. There were too many details about and categories of bank accounts and too many difficult words to understand. The complexity of the situation led Helen to feel unsure and unsafe about opening a bank account because without an account she could not receive money from home. In her home country, although she did not know all of the technical terms, she could understand 80 per cent of the meaning, because she could learn the rest from her family and friends. The only participant who did not recall any language barrier in public places was Mandy. She felt confident communicating in English, seeing it as a survival skill rather than an academic language.

#### **Theme four: Academic and functional language competence**

During the first semester in the classroom, some participants needed extra time to think about the right words to use so that they could express their thoughts in the class discussions. Lucy and Helen expressed this phenomenon. When the appropriate time came for them to make a comment about some issues being raised and discussed, Lucy mentioned that she always missed the timing and felt left behind. Helen, on the other hand, became frustrated and depressed. When they thought they were ready, their classmates and lecturers had already moved on to the next topic.

Besides timing, the process of learning itself proved difficult for participants who did not know how to construct essay papers academically. It requires steps of preparation, such as searching information, reading, paraphrasing, analysing, discussing, citing and referencing. Works cannot be duplications of others. Helen did not say that she had writing problems, only difficulties with assignments. Much time was spent on preparation and she needed time to adjust to this. Study in her home country was much easier than in Australia. She simply surfed the Internet in search of information. There was no prescribed research style as referencing was not strict. It only took half an hour for her to complete an assignment. As opposed to the situation in Australia, where she said, it was a lot of work to do just one paper. First, she must do some research in the library, on the Internet, and then read books. The most important thing she had to remember was to be mindful of plagiarism, which could lead to trouble. In this sense, she felt it was difficult.

When Mandy, Lucy and Helen attended classes in Australia, they all experienced shock, because they were culturally distant from the type of participation and interaction required by Australian universities.

Mandy, for example, expressed her difficulty with Australian pedagogy, which focuses more on a learner-centred approach. Class discussion and interaction are considered very important; everyone is supposed to be active in class. This is why Mandy never spoke in the classroom, even after studying in Australia for a long time. It made her feel uncomfortable, and she lacked confidence.

Lucy expressed her feeling of reluctance to 'interrupt' in class; she thought it was rude. She even felt strange and perplexed to see her classmates' nonverbal communication, i.e. raising a hand and pointing their index finger in the air. It was considered rude in her culture to raise the hand like that in class. Students who came from European countries tended not to bring comfort to the class as far as Helen was concerned. She could see their thinking patterns and logic were different from hers. They were more individualistic, knew what they wanted and had goals to reach; they always said things directly and got straight to the point. In contrast, having come from a collectivistic society, Helen preferred to learn through a process of collaboration. The ways in which these people behaved in class were different from those she practiced. She was not used to it and felt a little uncomfortable among them.

As regards interaction outside the classroom, a few participants expressed a lack of confidence over a long period of time, particularly in pubs and restaurants. Lucy confessed that she did not have any confidence when speaking English during her first year in Australia. Rather, she experienced low self-esteem and assumed that her English was not excellent (although she thought it was adequate). She did want to speak English perfectly, but it was not perfect by her standards.

Mandy too faced disorientation due to unfamiliarity. She experienced anxiety seeing how people in Australia often seemed to be in a rush to get somewhere. The food sold and consumed in Australia was not the same food she ate at home. At home she ate rice and noodles all the time, but in Australia, bread and sandwiches were commonly consumed. Also, at home she drove a car, but in Australia she had to use public transport. Her unfamiliarity apparently had nothing to do with one-on-one interaction.

#### **Theme five: Patterns of socialisation determined by language competence**

Participants reduced their anxiety by means of taking refuge with friends, classmates, professors, a boyfriend, parents, customers, a good English program, mass media and the library. Some participants still held onto their positive attitudes towards learning English from Theme One in that they were willing to learn and take risks. Time and withdrawing from the class would also help them learn and adjust. Many participants prioritised going to meet/ visit friends when they faced some problems. Some preferred international friends from Asia, whereas others sought the company of someone of the same nationality. Some were fortunate to have a special friend in the host country. Nationality for others did not matter. Lucy, Vivian and Mandy, for instance, expressed a personal preference for international peers coming from Asian countries. They felt more comfortable and confident hanging around and chatting with their Asian peers. Mandy usually felt more relaxed asking her Asian classmates for academic assistance. Lucy reasoned that they were culturally the same as her and she was not stressed out communicating in English with them, while Vivian found that talking to Asian friends was much easier. She had made many friends from China, Japan, and Thailand when studying at the university language school. Sherry would express her feelings of depression and stress by talking to friends about her struggles. And these friends could be of any nationality, e.g. Westerners or people from her own country. She had no personal preference. She considered herself lucky because all of her friends in Australia were good listeners and understood 'where she was coming from'.

Mandy and Helen were the ones who felt more comfortable asking friends from their own country for help. The former admitted that she chose to talk to her friends on the phone and to cry over it, which usually helped ease her tense feelings. In fact, it was easier to release her tensions in her own language. For Helen, asking for help from a few friends who could speak the same language and had been in Australia longer for help was definitely a solution for her. She admitted that she felt more relaxed when they accompanied her to the bank and helped her open a bank account and get an ATM card. It seemed advantageous for Amy to have an Australian boyfriend as he reassured her with advice and comfort. Life in a strange environment without him, she thought, could result in hassles and misfortune. Whenever she found herself in a difficult situation, she would consult him and get a second opinion from him; and usually, she took his opinion into account.

For some participants, dealing with the language barrier and negative feelings was dependent upon both classmates and professors. For example, Jenny overcame her difficulty in understanding by first waiting and listening to at least two other classmates respond to the issue being raised. This helped her to grasp the main thrust of what was being discussed. Then she tried to pay close attention. If her listening comprehension failed to improve, she would go either to her classmates or professors and ask them to explain what she missed in class. She found these people very helpful. Unlike Jenny, Helen would go directly to her professors and in search of advice, especially about assignments. It often takes no little courage for Asian students to do this since in their homeland there is usually a big gap or power distance between the two parties. She emphasised that the reason she sought advice was to meet all the requirements of her papers so that she would not fail.

Sharing her experience of the language barrier with friends back home appeared to be a mission for Jenny, who had worked for over ten years and was sent to study in Australia by her employer. She stressed that she would definitely share her experiences with them so that they could prepare themselves before going abroad to study. They should not only study Standard English at school but also try to learn colloquialism, i.e. how native English speakers talk in their daily lives. Watching either movies or television dramas would provide them with some idea about how native speakers talk, including their use of slang.

Sherry appeared to be the only one among all of the participants who found a sense of security through talking with her father and mother on the phone. Adopting a normal tone of voice while talking to them was her priority although she felt frustrated, she did not want to worry them. Just elaborating about what was going on in her life eased her tensions when she was going through a difficult time.

Meeting new people through work and being offered help with language proved tremendously useful during the adapting process. As a professional manicurist, and working part time, Vivian enjoyed her work life as it allowed her to meet people. Most of her customers, whom she considered loyal, were willing to correct her English and explain the meanings of some Aussie slang and expressions. They tried to help her cope with the local culture. Her job provided her with some advantages even though it did not allow her to talk to customers all the time as she had to concentrate on the different details used in manicuring. She came to the conclusion that her actual life was much tougher than she expected because of the time of work which diminished the number of hours she could devote to study.

In addition to seeking help and comfort from people known to them, trust in a good English program for academic purposes has boosted some participants' confidence. Sherry, for example, found that attending the language classes for three months had facilitated her studies at the University. She positively stated that she felt much more comfortable and confident writing assignments because she had learned English properly and practiced her writing skills right from the start. She was taught how to write complete sentences. Learning academic skills also helped her with her speaking skills, because she learned the correct ways to use English. Now she is able to talk more, rather than just smiling continuously. As well, she gets along well with international friends, since it has become much easier for her to interact with people and to solve problems caused by the language barrier.

The longer some of the participants stayed in Australia, the better they seemed able to confront their anxiety. The most obvious example was Lucy. As one year passed by, she gained even more confidence in herself and her use of English. She managed to overcome the frustration associated with her long stay and life experiences of viewing the world around her. Even though her English level was not really improving, she was no longer afraid of speaking English with anyone, either native or non-native speakers. She believed that if native English speakers could not comprehend what she said, it was their problem, not hers. English was their mother tongue, so they should be able to interpret what she said no matter how her speech patterns sounded.

Throughout her one-year experience, Lucy developed empathy for others learning a foreign language. She said that she had met many foreigners who had learned how to communicate in her mother tongue. She felt very sorry for them when she failed to understand what they were saying. Instead, she blamed herself, thinking that it was her fault that she could not understand them, because she was a native language speaker of Korean and had used the Korean language all her life.

As time went by, apart from Lucy at the language school, Sherry was also able to adapt well to the environment outside the classroom. She understood strangers talking to each other in the street, and her Australian friends commented that she had an Aussie accent and they had no problems communicating with her. She assumed that she unconsciously picked up the accent from people talking around her and in the street. She had total confidence in her interaction with people in any public place. Actually, it was not a matter of where the public place was, but one of to whom she was talking. For example, at her part-time job, she always chatted with the customers and noticed that they would talk to her longer, if she let them know that she was a student. She guessed that they expected her to carry on a more lengthy conversation. She insisted that she had no need to cope with anything outside the classroom as she was doing fine and had a new confidence.

Trying to improve knowledge in one's free time was another good strategy for coping employed by three participants: Sherry, Amy and Vivian. The first one said that she usually watched movies and read newspapers, and did hobbies that made her feel more confident when interacting with others. She did not want to feel worthless "like someone from the Third World". The second one updated her knowledge through accessing the ABC Website. This had been recommended by one of her professors from a media class, and Amy took the advice into action and admitted that she learned a lot from the Web. Her background knowledge increased significantly, and she felt more confident in her interaction with the class. The third one spent time in the library, where she could find some books relevant to her topic to read, so that she would not fall behind in class.

Willingness to learn more about the English language in different contexts including the host environment and culture appealed to several participants. This involved their perceptions and positive attitudes. Although some participants continued to have a hard time adjusting to the host country, they selected this approach because they were in the open-minded stage that allowed them to equip themselves with cultural and linguistic skills. Jenny noticed the cultural differences between Australians and her own society, which could have unsettled her, but she viewed this positively as a process of learning in a new cultural environment. She began to accept the fact that all newcomers had to go through the same process, since everything in Australia was different from life at home. She was also optimistic, realising that sooner or later she would be able to overcome the language barrier by means of the accumulation of her experiences through a long process.

Helen claimed that she no longer had problems when it came to interaction in the classroom. She felt she had more problems with her social life admitting at the same time that it was very simple to cope by encouraging herself to be more exposed to the local culture and to communicate more with both local and international people. Recently she had developed an interest in Australian values and beliefs based on Christianity. She was invited to attend a local church by her landlord's teenage granddaughter and accepted without hesitation. Helen has visited the church from time to time since then.

At the church, Helen learned more new words, values and beliefs. It was a new experience in that it was not what she had perceived about going to church. In her mind, people who went there must be serious about life, as they needed to pray. Church was considered to be a holy place, not a place where people went to have fun. Therefore, she did not understand at first why the people there, mostly young looking went crazy, singing modern rock-and-roll songs, jumped and danced on stage. However, the one characteristic she recognised in them was their enthusiasm for worshipping God.

Soon Helen understood the general meaning of the concept of going to church on Sunday mornings, and she thought it reasonable. She appreciated how the landlord's granddaughter shared her faith in God with her, thinking that He could help her. She also enjoyed going to church with her, because the atmosphere made her feel relaxed, and she met many Australians and learned about their daily lives. Sometimes she sang along with the church members and closed her eyes like they did. She could feel the presence of God and learned some stories from the Bible, which had meaningful and practical values. The Pastor preached interesting sermons, which could be applied to her daily life.

Amy learned a great deal about Aussie slang, idioms, expressions and culture at places such as a fast food restaurant, a supermarket and a gym, *the real world*. At the same time, she felt these were the places where she could feel embarrassed and ashamed, because of her lack of a thorough knowledge of the language and culture. However, she willingly moved ahead to the stage where she did not mind

negotiating and making mistakes so that she could learn more and overcome her misunderstandings. One example of the latter was when her boyfriend asked her to buy "two hamburgers with the lot", which made no sense to her. Her willingness to learn what it meant, impelled her into the shop to order them. She felt relieved to see that the shop assistant understood her and gave her two hamburgers with everything listed on the menu, including onions and tomatoes.

Willingness to take a risk was another adjustment technique for some participants, Amy in particular, who admitted how ashamed she felt in the past if she found herself in a situation where people did not understand what she was saying or if there was misinterpretation during a conversation. She went through this experience because of a communication gap. Now that she had become familiar with her new cultural environment through her extensive and ongoing encounters with Australian life, the shame she had felt gradually vanished. She had developed sufficient confidence to ask others for clarification if she could not make any sense out of a conversation. She really believed that it was natural for her not to understand everything fully, and if she did not know about something, she would definitely ask questions. She felt more comfortable doing so; in most cases now as she became braver and more willing to take risks asking questions. She assumed that Australians would do the same if they came to her country.

The following example took place at a gym where Amy became a member. She had found a ski trip that she and her boyfriend wanted to join. So she asked a worker at the gym for some information. Although she did not feel embarrassed, she felt uneasy because of the communication gap. The conversation was long, and the interaction was not exactly pleasant, due to both verbal and nonverbal communication. Trying to find out some details regarding accommodation was not simple at all, since no one knew anything about it. Another informant was referred to and Amy was advised to call her. When she asked the name of the girl who could give her more detail, the original worker, instead of speaking normally, held her name tag on her shirt, pointed at her name and repeated it slowly. Basically, it was an example of misunderstanding and miscommunication, so Amy had to calm down and sort things out by asking the girl again.

One participant had to withdraw from a class where the content of the lecture did not make sense due to her lack of background knowledge and the lecturer's heavily accented English. Vivian admitted that she did not know what to do since it was her first semester, and all she could do was to withdraw from the class and enrol in a class taken by a native speaker, whose accent was more familiar to her.

## 5. Discussion

The results indicated that all of the participants undertook to learn English as a means of professional and social accomplishment. In their home country, if they are able to communicate in English well, they will gain a sense of privilege and prestige because they will have more choices and better opportunities for employment. Other people will additionally look up to them as well. The formulated commonalities suggest that most of those were motivated in and had positive attitudes towards learning the language and had a particular purpose, i.e. to be recognisably educated, and to earn a Masters degree from a Western university. In Australia, such learning English affects their sense of dignity at school, at work and at public places. All participants encountered negative feelings because of their inadequate language and cultural competences in both academic and non-academic spheres. When it came to dealing with such negative feelings attributable to lack of sufficient language proficiency, they collectively opted to seek a comfort from different groups of people.

The commonalities in the research outcomes exhibit three different time frames shown below. The second and third phases answer the two key research questions.

*1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup>*

*Life in the Transition to a new social Being equipped with*

*homeland environment (Australia), English language*

*negative encounters competence*

*The first stage occurred prior to the arrival of the participants in Australia for the purpose of the pursuit of education and the opportunity to acquire English. Back in the home country, they learned and utilised English as a foreign language, learning it in school as a foreign language. This meant that spoken communication was not widely emphasised; therefore, in the accelerated trend of globalization, if they can communicate in English well or effectively, they can have a significant share of what is available out there in their society including wealth and influence. Most of them possessed the motivation in and positive attitudes towards learning English during their compulsory studies. Only a few evinced negative attitudes towards learning English, because they did not enjoy studying it. One of them did not appreciate the fact that all students must learn the language as a compulsory subject. It also involved reasons as to why they made the decision to pursue their education and graduate within one year or one and a half years, depending upon their study options in Australia.*

*The second stage refers to the period of time immediately after the participants made the transition from the homeland to Australia. Each participant was in a situation where English was the medium of communication and instruction. Once they started the class and socialized, they encountered negative experiences in that they all went through a difficult time, primarily because they lacked adequate knowledge of English, different varieties of English and the local culture.*

*The third stage is associated with the time when the participants responded to and dealt with the aforementioned negative encounters. Most of them had already been through this process as they had been in Australia for some periods of time. Although some of them were in Australia for a few months, they had adapted themselves to their new social environment but lacked confidence when using English. Only a few recent arrivals were still enmeshed in this process.*

### **5.1 Life in the homeland**

*A propos of the first stage, it is apparent that the motives of the participants to learn English fit the dimensional framework conceptualised by Dörnyei and Clément (2001), which refers to affective/integrative, instrumental/pragmatic, self-concept-related, goal-related and significant other-related. Factors, i.e. parents, teachers, professors, friends, relatives and social perceptions indicate the influences of a collectivistic culture on the participants' motivation in learning English. Parents can make a great impact on their children's motivation in and positive attitudes towards English language learning. Their encouragement can motivate children: they will be advised by them, and/ or they respectfully accept their advice. Teachers, too, are viewed as influential figures by their young students. Professors are also counted as influential. They are socially and formally positioned to be good role models for their adult students, deliver comprehensible lectures and use psychological teaching methods. Peers and relatives also play significant roles in the English language learning context. Good feelings come to the fore when close family members, friends and relatives, attribute importance to the level of success. Prospects and social promise and recognition further influence the adult student, who reasons that when she returns home, her life will be different in a positive sense.*

*Personal view was another significant factor that affected all participants' instrumental/ pragmatic motives to learn English. They recognised the necessity of becoming competent in English in order to get a job easily, either at home or abroad. Amy's and Jenny's affective/integrative motives allowed them to perceive how the world in the current era of globalisation has become smaller and how important and useful English has become vis-à-vis accessing first-hand online information.*

*Not surprisingly, cultural collectivism plays a vital role not only in one's motivation in and attitudes towards learning English but also in decision-making. The participants' individual decisions to study in Australia showed significant influence of groups of people, such as parents, family members, peers and employers, even when the participants had already reached adulthood, finished high school and college, started a job, and settled down with their own families. Although there were many English-speaking countries to select from, Australia became their final choice due to certain cultural and personal factors such as financial status, recognition of a particular educational program, proximity and personal expectations.*

### **5.2 Transition to a new social environment and negative encounters**

*In the second phase, which marked the participants' transition from the homeland to a new environment in Australia as sojourners or as international EFL students whose English is non-native, their use of English had shifted to an international language. English in this social context was not alien to them but became part of their daily life reality and academic lives. This does not suggest that they would not encounter any difficulty in communicating with others although they had studied and used English for a number of years. Some of them had already worked in fields that required English competence and possessed confidence in communicating in English. For instance, Mandy, awarded a degree from an Australian university, returned home to work for a company that allowed her to use English. Jenny and Amy had worked for a well-known state-owned television network and a state primary school, respectively. Jenny worked in the field of translation that required good competence in English. Amy worked as an English teacher and had extra opportunities to practice her English with her Australian boyfriend. Every day at work and in social circles they came in contact with people who knew and utilised English.*

*In addition to their language experience, most of the participants passed and met the minimum requirement of the English proficiency tests, such as TOEFL and IELTS. Some of them had gone through a direct entry language school. Vivian and Helen had no work experience prior to their arrival in Australia and had studied English for many years. Both enrolled in the English programs at the University's language school. Vivian studied for a few months before being admitted to the postgraduate program. Helen who wanted to ensure her English proficiency took English classes for five weeks despite the fact that she passed the IELTS English proficiency exam, with the minimum required overall band of 6.5. Lucy tried really hard to overcome her hatred of English language study. She studied English not only at home but also in Australia, where she spent six months studying academic writing skills. Sherry initially studied at a language school in Sydney for six months. Then she continued to study for another year and a half to earn a diploma in marketing management.*

*Despite the length of the participants' English study, the results of their standardised English tests and even the assumption about their gender, they all without exception encountered language shock. They were further challenged when they experienced difficulty understanding 'World Englishes'. Most participants were unaccustomed to hearing the different English accents spoken by their international classmates and professors. Amy became confused with the variety of world Englishes used in different social contexts and conveying different meanings that were spoken by her classmates when working in a group project.*

*Besides the 'language shock' caused by different Others, the lack of language skills and knowledge of English for specific purposes were other issues that engendered frustration in some participants. Two participants had inadequate language skills practices, and another two had insufficient background knowledge of some subjects. Two participants experienced difficulty with transactions/ interaction at the bank. Technically, the English terms commonly used were alien to them. They appeared related to the different language skills they needed in order to survive not only academically but also interpersonally. The thinking process including the different teaching and learning styles unfamiliar to some of the participants created obstacles during their study. They wanted to adjust to academic life but faced a difficult time in doing so. Culturally speaking, in the Western classroom, the power distance between teachers and students is low. This results in informality. Teachers expect their students to engage with them actively in a participatory-interactive, learner-centred approach.*

*Conversely, the cultures in many Asian countries place importance on a passive-receptive posture, in which the relationship between teachers and students is high. Students are formally taught to behave and express themselves correctly. They are not allowed to interrupt when the teacher is talking. Questioning the teacher may be seen as a form of disrespect (Chen, 1991, 1994). For this reason, Asian students often feel left out of the interaction and discussions in the Australian classroom. Trying to engage with the class did not seem natural for Lucy and Helen. They viewed class participation and interaction as scripted, a script with which they were unfamiliar. In their own script, the sequences of attending the class were different. Students were required to listen to the teacher quietly and wait until they were allowed to raise their hands politely. They were selected to ask questions which were very structured.*

*During their initial time of study, the participants explicitly expressed their feeling of 'unpleasantness'. The adjective words indicating this negativism included 'anxious', 'reluctant', 'strange', 'perplexed',*

'disoriented', 'depressed', 'frustrated', 'unsure', 'unsafe', 'insecure', 'uncomfortable', 'bored', 'left behind' and 'unconfident'. Those feelings were affected by their encounters of language and cultural barriers inside and outside the class. Lack of confidence was common among them. These negative feelings appeared to impact on their well-being in a sense that they felt insecure and perhaps undignified because English for them was deemed as a vehicle for a sense of accomplishment.

### **5.3 Being equipped with English language competences**

By the third stage, the participants' encounters in academic and everyday life had changed in a positive way. After a prolonged stay in Australia, they had moved on motivationally adjusting themselves and trying to develop some new ways to cope with the anxiety provoked by the language shock they had encountered during the second phase, instead of struggling with it. Their language competence was improved and their confidence increased, allowing one of the participants to empathise with the other foreign language learners. How well and rapidly they were able to deal with their problems in a new social context had much to do with their positive attitudes and the reasons why they decided to migrate to Australia for a certain period of time (mentioned in the first phase). The participant who positively perceived the world around her, and who came to Australia as the result of the collective influence of groups of people, did not appear to have major problems of adjustment.

As regards coping with the negative effects of using English and feelings of lack of confidence, most of the participants collectively used similar channels to cope with studying and living in Australia. They went to someone they knew and could trust and felt comfortable talking to, for instance, friends, classmates, professors, a boyfriend, parents and customers. Clearly, they were not professional counsellors. This reflects cultural collectivism, in that the relationship between the participant and her group members, namely community and family, is highly valued.

Some participants realised that leaning on close friends was not sufficient to help them survive academically. It was their will power that pushed them to take a risk and to find the specific language learning approach which suited their needs so that they could improve their English language competence, achieve their study goals and feel more confident. One of them learned to negotiate with the locals. Three of them opted for the mass media, such as watching movies, reading newspapers and surfing the Internet. Only one settled for a reliable academic English program. Two took significant advantage of mingling with people in the real world, such as a fast food restaurant, a supermarket and a church, where they learned a considerable amount of Australian slang, idioms, expressions and cultural values and beliefs.

Once the participants managed to enter the adapting stage, and began to equip themselves with English competence and positively perceived the world around them, they appeared to gain a sense of dignity in that their feeling of 'unpleasantness' was partly replaced with confidence. This may imply that confidence is the key indicator for N-NESB students' sense of dignity.

### **6. Conclusion**

The participants' personal insights into and rich experiences gained when learning the English language answer the two research questions. First, how does learning English affect their sense of dignity in an Australian social environment? Second, how do they deal with negative encounters at school, at work (for those participants who worked) and in public arena? In the homeland, learning and acquiring of English is perceived to be socially recognised, especially in those who can communicate well with foreigners. This may boost their sense of dignity. In Australia, utilising English competently is even more essential for the participants who are sojourners. Their sense of dignity tend to increase if they function well within a comfortable zone and with confidence wherein they can understand what is going on, e.g. in the classroom, take part in group discussions and complete all of the required assignments. Outside the class in the public social spaces, utilising English is not a major obstacle as the language use required appears much simpler. How well they can adjust themselves to the life in Australia partly rests upon their prior attitudes and motivation vis-à-vis in English language learning as well as reasons why they study in Australia. This may suggest that in the world of N-NESB, apart from learners' mother tongue, English is another source of dignity which may be a new key indicator in assessing their sense of dignity. If they feel confident, they may perceive that they can communicate in English without barriers regardless of how well they in fact can communicate and vice versa.

All participants, being females, established their language proficiency by taking a standardised test and/or a direct entry language school. Some of them felt very confident using English due to previous work experience and socialisation with foreigners in their home countries. Yet, it did not suggest that they were more likely to achieve in academic and interpersonal skills. They still confronted language and cultural barriers, more so in the class and less outside the class. Their failure in comprehending spoken world Englishes and interacting with others including friends, classmates, professors and bankers apparently gave them a hard time. This had led them to feel negative or down and diminished their sense of dignity.

The implications of this outcome significantly highlight the drive needs for an enrichment program, one that will offer support for non-native English-speaking students. On the one hand, all concerned parties, namely the International Student Office and all of the departments with a high number of overseas students, should be made aware of the barriers and assist the students in adjusting themselves socially and academically. They may offer an intensive workshop on survival language and culture to all N-NESB students who are admitted to the University before or after their arrival in Australia. On the other hand, EFL teachers should be responsible for an additional role to let their students be aware of the varieties of world Englishes so that those who desire to study abroad in an English speaking country can find some ways to acquaint themselves with those English varieties.

Growing up as Asian, all of the participants shared a similar collectivist cultural background. The support and advice they received from members of their community was beneficial when all participants experienced difficulty studying and coping with their new and often negative experiences. In order to survive socially and academically in the Australian context, the participants' motivation and attitudes were primarily and positively driven to adjust their cognition and behaviours so as to diminish their negative feelings. They would seek for clarification, become aware of other language learners' thoughts and feelings, take risks, discuss their thoughts and feelings with friends, and co-operate with native English speakers. In terms of academic English, some participants who knew their shortcomings were particularly keen on seeking assistance from a reliable English language program and the mass media since they perceived that it was the best way to improve their English.

One of the limitations of this study is the number of participants, which may have been too small. Also, the results were limited to qualitative data, the sole technique employed for data collection. The study was tailored to fit time constraints and the limitations of the undertaken initial study. Seven participants suited the time frame. Further research into the same topic and investigation of how international students' English language proficiency affects their academic and social lives during their initial, middle and final periods of study at University is strongly recommended. The inclusion of male participants is recommended. The study can be either longitudinal or cross-sectional. A mixed-method approach may be adopted, beginning with qualitative exploratory interviews using in-depth unstructured questions followed by a quantitative survey developed from the qualitative results, to determine the specific relationships between relevant variables. The surveys are then distributed among the target population, with a larger number of subjects.

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## **Appendix A**

Questions in the survey are as follows:

1. What country are you from?
2. What is your mother tongue?
3. How old are you?
4. How long have you studied English?
5. What are you studying here at the University?
6. What is the range of your English proficiency test?

IELTS band: 0-5 6-9

TOEFL score: less than 500 more than 500

no comment

7. How long have you studied in Australia?

Since the questions are open-ended, Fetterman (1998) recommended that the interview was held casually, as normal conversations. The questions would be flexible upon interacting and conversing back and forth between the researcher and each interviewee. When data given by the interviewee appeared to be interesting and rich, the researcher could re-direct further interview questions. Here are the examples:

1. How does your English affect your learning in the class?
2. How does your English affect your interaction with the class (the teacher/classmates)?

Other questions include the following:

1. Why do you think it affects your interaction?
2. How do you feel towards the interaction (positive/ negative views)?
3. How do you deal with those feelings (if they are rather negative)?
4. How does your English affect your daily life at church or any religious sacred places?
5. What about pubs and restaurants?
6. Do you see your English having any impact on you when shopping in a supermarket and a department store as well as going to a tourist site? How?
7. Are there any of those particular places where you feel insecure or uncomfortable with using your English? Where?
8. Do you know why you have that kind of feelings, and how do you cope with it?

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### **About the author**

Noparat Tananuraksakul is currently a first-year PhD candidate, International Communication, Macquarie University. Her PhD thesis project is a continuation of the present paper findings which aim to explore the impacts of English language proficiency on non-native English speaking background students' perceptions of their English competence, security and dignity. Their past attitudes and motivation on their present expectations and responses to negative experiences in the social context of EIL are as well included.

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